

North Wilkesboro *"About 71 percent of the people who live in Stokes County are leaving the county to find work, yet they are holding onto their land here because the cost of living is cheaper. The economy is really kind of changing the way rural communities look."*

"This is a scary time in our state's history, but it's also a time of enormous opportunity. People with low-skill levels are seeing the need for retraining, and communities are becoming more motivated to tap into new initiatives like tourism to make money."

"Economic development is a lot of things, not just industrial recruitment. It's basically anything to encourage growth and create the flow of money. Existing industries need economic development support more than anything right now for security and growth."

Roper *"The public perception is that local governments are really struggling, but many of them were bad off before, too."*

"We've got a lot of so-called 'bedroom communities' in rural North Carolina, places where people live in one place

but go to work in another county or even another state. It's not necessarily a bad thing, but at some point we need to address the problem of how do you support efforts that allow people to live where they want to and still have good jobs."

"I for one worry about what this economic mess we are in will mean for community development. We need to keep our downtowns alive."

Raleigh *"The Community College system needs to be able to respond more quickly to workforce trends it sees in the communities they serve. Oftentimes the new programs they offer were designed to address a two or three-year-old problem because it took that long to jump through all the hoops in place."*

"Increasingly, we are shipping off our commodities to other states. We need to do more value-added in agriculture so farmers can stay in business."

"There is a lot of frustration right now because there is so much bureaucracy in state government

that says you have to build and operate things in such a way that it kills jobs. Everyone agrees we need environmental controls in place, for instance, but at what point do they become ludicrous because they're causing poultry farmers to send their processing overseas?"

The North Carolina Rural Economic Development Center is a private, non-profit corporation whose mission is to improve the quality of life of rural North Carolinians. The center is governed by a 50-member board of directors. Officers are Kelly S. King, chair; Valeria Lee, 1st vice chair; Bill Veeder, 2nd vice chair; Sandra Gambill, secretary; Edmund Aycock, treasurer; Billy Ray Hall, president. Editorial staff: Elaine Matthews, editor; Michelle Taylor, writer; Steve Gaj, design; Kelly Tucker Griffin, production manager. Inquiries should be directed to: Editor, 4021 Carya Drive, Raleigh, NC 27610. Tel.(919) 250-4314. *RURAL ROUTES* is a quarterly publication with a circulation of 4,500. All rights reserved.

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RURAL ROUTES

The North Carolina Rural Economic Development Center, Inc.

Summer 2003 Volume 14 Number 2

"It's all about jobs," say rural North Carolinians

Rural Center holds regional economic development forums across the state

The message was clear from the more than 500 rural residents, business and community leaders that came together this spring for a series of meetings hosted by the Rural Center on economic development: the state must take action to stem the loss of jobs in rural North Carolina and do it quickly. Business creation and job training are key, they said, to sustaining quality of life in rural communities and to closing the ever-widening prosperity gulf between distressed rural counties and more economically stable urban counties.



"At the end of the day, it's about jobs, it's all about jobs," said N.C. Congressman Bob Etheridge at the Fayetteville forum May 31. "We've got to

support the growth of small business. The last time I checked, Microsoft and SAS started as small businesses."

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A caption about this telecenter

Regional forums offer everyone a chance to be heard

In their own words ...Regional forum participants respond to the challenges ahead

Asheville

"We must do more to develop our youth to be job creators, instead of training them to work inside the old box that was manufacturing."

"I agree that jobs are the thing we want to focus on for the long-term, but another long-term issue that gets very little discussion right now is health care. We've got a serious health crisis in the western part of the state right now; people cannot afford to go to the doctor because they don't have insurance, and we have an aging population here."

"We've got to get out of that mindset of the buffalo hunt, and to do that we're going to have to rethink the way we go about economic development from all sides. I don't get a sense that that is being done."

Fayetteville

"There should be more funding for retraining these laid-off workers who've only had one skill their whole life. It seems like the funding that's out there is tied up in so many different programs; it should be more centralized in local governments for easy access."

"We need more advocates for rural counties in the state legislature. We have that 'two states' mentality sometimes, but urban lawmakers should be focused on rural issues as well."

"Something like 20 percent of elementary school enrollment in Fayetteville right now is made up of Hispanic students. They are going to need skills training for the future."

see **quotes** on page 8

The Rural Center conducted regional forums at five sites across the state in the spring of 2003 to connect with rural citizens and leaders on the critical issues facing their region. A crucial part of each forum was a participant survey the center created to capture the thoughts and opinions of those attending, a kind of snapshot of these rural communities that could be used to guide the center's policy work in the coming months and years. Participants were asked to evaluate quality of life in their region, both for themselves and others, and to assess the outlook for their region over the next five years and beyond. The survey also asked them to rank the most significant structural changes to affect their communities and to gauge the most important issues facing them today and in the future.

β Job creation tops the list of critical issues. About 50 percent of respondents indicated that creating job opportunities was the most important challenge for their region in the next five years. Additionally, 20 percent indicated that this issue would remain the most significant challenge beyond the next five years. (add more? From draft)

β Improving the education of youth and children also resonated with respondents, ranking as the second greatest challenge for communities throughout the state. The eastern half of the state felt even more strongly about the need for improving the educational opportunities and attainment of its youth with 33 percent of respondents ranking it second in importance compared with 15 percent in the west and piedmont areas of the state.

β Retraining the current workforce rated equally as important as education and was ranked as the third most important challenge facing North Carolina communities in the next five years. While all of the regions considered the need for retraining significant, slightly more emphasis was placed on the challenge of retraining in the central and piedmont communities, perhaps reflecting the areas of the state with overwhelming job losses in manufacturing and textiles.

β Balancing environmental protection and job creation is a tension that rural communities are keenly aware of and view as significant. Survey participants indicated that in spite of the almost desperate need for jobs, protection of their natural assets remains a critical challenge, particularly in the western part of the state. However, when asked about local assets, every region listed the natural environment as among their greatest assets.

β Meeting water and sewer needs remains an ever-present concern for rural communities struggling not only to serve current residents and businesses but providing opportunities for future growth. While it did not rank among the top three concerns, it was mentioned repeatedly as a key issue area for action by state and local leaders.

Creating job opportunities	20%	Creating job opportunities	25%
Improving education of children/youth	14%	Improving education of children/youth	17%
Regional cooperation	8%	Retraining current workforce	10%
Reducing poverty	8%	Balancing environmental protection & job creation	8%
Balancing environmental protection & job creation	7%	Meeting water/sewer needs	8%
Serving the growing Hispanic population	7%	Expanding local leadership	7%
Meeting health care needs	7%	Regional cooperation	6%
Meeting water/sewer needs	6%	Serving the growing Hispanic population	6%
Retraining current workforce	5%	Meeting transportation needs	5%
Expanding local leadership	5%	Meeting Internet access needs	3%
Accessing financial resources	4%	Meeting health care needs	2%
Meeting transportation needs	3%	Reducing poverty	2%
Meeting Internet access needs	2%	Accessing financial resources	1%

More on page 9



A caption about this group of forum participants

jobs *from page 1*

The five regional economic development forums – held in Raleigh, Roper, Asheville, North Wilkesboro and Fayetteville from late March through May – were designed to generate discussion and new ideas around the needs of rural communities as they struggle to retain jobs and deliver basic services in the wake of staggering layoffs and a stagnant economy. The meetings were a collaborative effort among the Rural Center, the N.C. Community Foundation and the Rural Economic Development Organization to open a dialogue between rural leaders and organizations with the resources to help.

Participants heard the latest information on issues facing North Carolina, including structural changes to the state's economy as well as shifts in rural and urban populations, then had an opportunity to network with one another and speak to members of the philanthropic community including the Warner Foundation, Z. Smith Reynolds and the Golden LEAF Foundation. N.C. Community Foundation Director Liz Fentress said her organization, which administers a collection of endowed funds through 51 local community foundation affiliates, has changed the focus of its grants making process to maximize impact in rural communities reeling from plant closings and layoffs in the manufacturing sector.

“In the last few years we’ve been working to deal with the challenges that are out there, and one of the ways we’re doing that is making it possible for counties to have their own community foundation, because we know it’s a powerful force,” Fentress said at the Raleigh forum on March 30. “We are also hoping to develop a pool of funds in the future to administer with the Rural Center for job creation and economic development.”

Each regional forum concluded with attendees breaking into small groups for an open discussion of the issues facing their communities, where they were asked to assess their local economic situation, to talk about current initiatives taking place and to identify steps that could be taken by local and state leaders to respond to needs. Not surprisingly, job creation was the single most prevalent issue at each of the regional forums. Creating an environment that supports small business development and nurtures entrepreneurial growth was key, they said, to a sustained long-term economic restructuring of the state. An overwhelming number said industrial recruitment should not be abandoned but rather retooled to target specific industries with staying power. Rural leaders and communities must come to value the development of small, mid and large sized businesses equally, they said.

FUNDER'S CORNER

The Rural Center is pleased to welcome Piedmont Natural Gas to its Rural Partners Corporate Group, a year-old fundraising initiative of the center aimed at giving businesses the opportunity to make annual donations to support center operations. To date, 26 corporate partners have joined in the effort.

The center has also received generous donations for the 2003 Rural Partners Forum, which will be recognized in the fall issue of Rural Routes.

RURAL PARTNERS

CORPORATE GROUP

Bank of America
 BB&T
 BellSouth
 Blue Cross Blue Shield of North Carolina
 Central Carolina Bank
 Cisco Systems
 Duke Power
 East Carolina Bank
 First Citizens
 Harvey Enterprises
 Jordan Lumber
 Macon Bank
 McGill Associates
 Mechanics and Farmers Bank
 Murphy Brown LLC
 Murphy Electric Power Board
 North Carolina Farm Bureau
 North Carolina's Touchstone Energy Cooperatives
 Piedmont Natural Gas
 Progress Energy
 RBC Centura
 RJR Tobacco
 Sprint
 Verizon
 Wachovia

Sustaining Foundation Partner

Z. Smith Reynolds Foundatoin



A caption about this telecenter

Telecenter's bring high-tech to North Carolina's most rural areas

Time and a changing global economy had, in equal parts, conspired against the old sewing factory on Atwood Street in Sparta until it eventually closed down for good three years ago. For a while it seemed as though the plant was destined to fade away altogether, until a local economic development group decided it was the perfect site to house a \$3 million technology hub capable of jump-starting the local economy by supporting entrepreneurial, education and job training efforts. Today, the 43,000 square-foot building is home to the Blue Ridge Business Development Center, the fourth so-called 'telecenter' in rural North Carolina funded in part by grants from the Rural Internet Access Authority.

Patrick Woodie, director of the Sparta telecenter and New River Community Partners, the western North Carolina economic development group that led the effort to bring a telecenter to Alleghany County, admits he raised a few eyebrows by choosing the site, but said renovating the old factory made good sense because it was a lot cheaper than building a new facility. Of the \$1 million the authority contributed to the project, only \$150,000 went to renovation, the rest to technical equipment and staff development.

"The building still has some of that old factory feel," said Woodie. "It's light and airy with the exposed beams and high ceilings. It doesn't feel like ordinary office space, and that's kind of the effect we wanted."

Ordinary, no, but one of the vital functions of all four telecenters is, in fact, to provide short and long-term lease space for entrepreneurs at a reasonable

Though they are fundamentally similar, the telecenters were each designed around the unique needs of their region and the communities they serve. Here is a brief synopsis of each telecenter in the state.

Blue Ridge Business Development Center

Location: Sparta

Opened: June 2003

Counties served: Alleghany

Major focus: Business and economic development, public Internet access, technical services, job training offered in conjunction with Wilkes Community College

Rural Internet Access Authority Funding: \$1,040,000

On the Web: www.blueridgebdc.org

Northeast Technology and Business Center

Location: Williamston

Opened: January 2002

Counties served: 16 northeast counties

Major focus: Business and economic development, public Internet access, technical services, training offered in conjunction with Martin County schools and Explor Net

Rural Internet Access Authority Funding: \$1,090,000

On the Web: www.nctelecenter.com

The Northeast Technology and Business Center has shown much success serving as a business incubator in the northeast, the most technologically challenged area of the state. Congressman Frank Ballance's decision to locate his district office in the building has also had a positive impact on local business recruitment.

Tri-County Community College Telecenter

Location: Three sites in Clay, Graham and Cherokee counties

Opened: May 2002

Counties served: Clay, Graham and Cherokee

Major focus: Education and job training, public Internet access

Rural Internet Access Authority Funding: \$806,800

On the Web: site under construction

Tri-County Community College Telecenter is unique in that it is the only one sponsored by the community college system, focusing primarily on education and job training initiatives in conjunction with the community college of Clay, Graham and Cherokee counties. The telecenter, which operates in three separate locations in the tri-county area, offers short-term courses to encourage community college enrollment and interest in continuing education, works closely with the local Economic Development Commission and provides public Internet access for travelers visiting the North Carolina mountains so they can stay in touch with their home business.

Duplin County Business Technology Centers

Location: Kenansville

Opened: January 2002

Counties served: Duplin and Jones

Major focus: Public access, digital literacy and workforce development, economic development

Rural Internet Access Authority Funding: \$842,887

On the Web: <http://www.telecenters.org>

Duplin County Business Technology Centers is made up of 15 satellite offices throughout Duplin and Jones counties, each focusing primarily on public Internet access and expanding digital literacy in the surrounding communities. In the coming months, however, the telecenter will begin to focus more on driving economic development in the two counties from a centralized business technology center in Warsaw.

telecenter's *from page 4*

price. All offices in the Sparta telecenter are networked to printers, copiers, scanners, faxes, and other expensive office equipment that entrepreneurs might not otherwise have access to. By offering a centrally located, technically equipped space for emerging business owners to build their ventures, telecenters have the ability to cultivate and nurture business development in the state's most rural areas.

There are other commonalities, too: each site provides public Internet access in rural communities where residents either don't have access to high-speed connections or cannot afford the service; all offer varying job training and educational programs through affiliations with local community colleges and economic development commission offices; and each performs a host of technical services to support the business sector in the communities they serve.

Having a full range of telecommunications services under one roof is invaluable to rural communities that are struggling to catch up to an increasingly high-tech world, according to Woodie. The telecenter he oversees houses the Alleghany campus of Wilkes Community College and Alleghany Joblink, the county's local Employment Security Commission office, a strategic move that Woodie says is important to building a comprehensive approach to rural business development.

"The community colleges offer the flexibility of doing things from the continuing education and curriculum standpoint, so the job training efforts are tailor-made," said Woodie. "There are now five associates degrees the college offers without the student having to leave Alleghany County, and by having Joblink in the building, that essentially means anyone in the county looking for work walks in the door."

The Rural Internet Access Authority has invested \$3.8 million in the telecenter initiative to date, and plans to raise funding over the next year to add as many as four new telecenters in other rural areas of the state where there is a real and identifiable need for an enhanced technology foundation, particularly in low-wealth counties.

N.C. lawmakers renew commitment on Internet connectivity through 2006

North Carolina lawmakers have given the go-ahead to move forward with the work of the Rural Internet Access Authority for an additional three years, allowing the initiative to further expand high-speed Internet access in areas of the state that lack the technology needed for economic development. Under the new law created by House Bill 1194 and signed by Gov. Easley, the organization – which was due to sunset on Dec. 31 – will continue its work as the e-NC Authority through 2006.

The new authority will have a similar mission and governing rules and will continue to focus primarily on expanding North Carolinians' access to affordable high-speed broadband technology. For the first time, distressed urban areas will qualify for program-related grants and initiatives. Other significant changes include the makeup of the authority's 21-member commission, which as of Jan. 1 will be scaled down to nine voting members and six non-voting members, as well as the adoption of a fundraising effort aimed at adding as many as four new technology hubs, or telecenters, across the state. Lawmakers have directed the Rural Center to continue to administer and staff the privately funded authority.

The Rural Internet Access Authority was established by groundbreaking legislation in 2000 that sought to strengthen the state's technology infrastructure and build capacity for high-speed Internet service and usage in rural communities. The new law makes clear that for all the authority's success in that mission, there is still much to do building a technology infrastructure capable of meeting the growing demands of local governments, businesses, educational and health systems and residents.

"We've come a long way these last three years in getting our rural communities connected to the Internet and more engaged in technology in general," said Rural Internet Access Authority Executive Director Jane Smith

Patterson, who will continue on in that role for the e-NC Authority. "We're making progress on closing the digital divide but there is certainly much still to do."

The Rural Internet Access Authority is widely believed to be the most ambitious statewide effort to boost access to Internet technology in the nation, administering more than \$19 million in grant funding to date. A new report by the Federal Communications Commission ranks North Carolina 11th in high-speed Internet usage in the nation, a milestone in part attributed to the work of the authority. According to the report, the number of high-speed subscriptions in the state jumped from 57,881 in December 1999 to 594,039 as of June 2003. Another significant finding in the report is that rural businesses are on par with urban companies when it comes to Internet connectivity.

Milestones of the Rural Internet Access Authority –

- Expansion of access to dial-up Internet service to all North Carolinians
- Identification and registration of Internet Service Providers statewide
- Development of a grants program to fund four model telecenters across the state
- Survey of citizens and local governments to determine perceptions of technology
- Inventory of North Carolina's technology infrastructure
- Creation of a student techforce to serve communities across the state
- Development of consumer friendly computer and Internet training opportunities for individuals and businesses

Fostering the Entrepreneurial
Spirit in Rural North Carolina

HomeGrown Jobs

October 22-23, 2003 • Hilton North Raleigh

Forum Highlights

Rural HomeGrown Jobs Initiative

The Rural Center will join with North Carolina leaders in announcing an exciting new initiative to stimulate entrepreneurship and small business development in the state's 85 rural counties. The initiative is a multi-pronged strategy to counter the current economic recession and help set our rural communities on the road to prosperity.

NCCBI President Phil Kirk

North Carolina Citizens for Business and Industry, the state's 'chamber of commerce,' has served as the voice for business, large and small, for 60 years. NCCBI's president Phil Kirk will talk about the critical role of entrepreneurs in the new economy and why we must take steps now to nurture this valuable resource.

Rural Entrepreneurs: Who, What, Where and Why?

The first step in building a strong support base for rural entrepreneurs and small businesses is to understand who they are and what they need. The Center for Rural Entrepreneurship has just completed an entrepreneurship study, commissioned by the Rural Center, and will be releasing findings at the forum.

New Video: "HomeGrown Jobs: Exploring the Possibilities"

The forum will open Thursday morning with the first showing of the Rural Center's video, "HomeGrown Jobs: Exploring the Possibilities." The video will feature interviews with a range of inspiring entrepreneurs who're reaping the financial and personal rewards of doing business in rural communities.

Creating Entrepreneur-friendly Communities

Two panels, featuring North Carolina's political, economic, and educational leadership, will take a hard look at the challenges facing our rural communities as they seek to create a climate that supports small business growth. Panelists also will share information on three initiatives that offer communities tools to meet these challenges.

Business Resources Expo

North Carolina has dozens of public and non-profit organizations, at the state and local levels, ready to serve the needs of small businesses. Forum participants will have the opportunity to browse through the Business Resources Expo to find out who these organizations are and how they can help.

Good Stuff

While at the forum, participants can pick up a number of useful items. Among these are a directory of state and local resource providers and a statistical summary of the entrepreneurship environment in all 100 counties. They will also be able to order a copy of the new video and take home a one-of-a-kind gift as a reminder of the forum.

Good Fun

We've expanded the Rural Partners Reception on Wednesday evening to 1 1/2 hours and added a free-floating luncheon on Thursday to give participants the opportunities for networking they've been asking for. There'll also be a chance to unwind and enjoy some top entertainment at the R.C.'s Rural Roadhouse following the banquet.



Mike Easley



Valeria Lee



Rick Carlisle



Tom Lambeth



Beverly Perdue



Marc Basnight



Andrea Harris



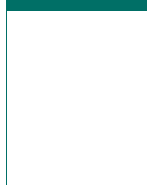
Dale Carroll



Mark Sorrells



Richard Morgan



Phil Kirk



Debra Markley



Jesse White



Jim Black



Molly Broad



Kelly King



Joe Stanley



Billy Ray Hall

Fees: \$65.00/person for reception and dinner on October 22
\$45.00/person for forum and meals on October 23
\$100.00/person for both events, October 22-23

For more information: Contact Kelly Griffin at the Rural Center.
Telephone (919) 250-4314. Fax (919) 250-4325.
E-mail kgriffin@ncruralcenter.org.

Clean water projects get needed boost in rural communities with \$19.9 million in grants

The Rural Center's board of directors voted Aug. 27 to award \$19,936,423 in Clean Water Bond grants to rural communities for water and wastewater system improvements. The board reviewed 150 grant proposals and selected 64 for approval.

"As rural North Carolina endures unsettling economic times, we've got to make sure we protect the foundation of our rural communities so they can build new opportunities in the future. That means ensuring they have plentiful, clean water," said Rural Center President Billy Ray Hall.

The center awards grants twice each year from the Clean Water Bonds approved by voters in 1998 and from state appropriations. The grants are awarded under three project categories: unsewered communities grants of up to \$3 million designed for communities without a central wastewater treatment facility; supplemental grants of up to \$400,000 to match funds already dedicated to a water or sewer project; and capacity building grants of up to \$40,000 to conduct the planning phase of water and wastewater projects.

The board also voted to finance four supplemental projects with \$1.2 million in funding from the N.C. General Assembly. Projects in Bertie, Harnett, Edgecombe and Stanly counties were funded under that category. Sale of the bonds will continue to fund clean water projects under the supplemental and capacity grants programs for one more year, while funding for the unsewered communities grant program will be expended next February.

Grant recipients

County	Recipient	Grant Amount			
Anson	Town of Morven	\$40,000	Hyde	Hyde County	\$400,000
Anson	Town of Lilesville	\$400,000	Johnston	Town of Four Oaks	\$200,000
Ashe	Town of Jefferson	\$40,000	Johnston	Ingrams W/SDistrict	\$291,000
Ashe	Town of West Jefferson	\$223,074	Jones	Town of Maysville	\$35,960
Beaufort	Richland Tnshp. Dis. 7	\$72,050	Lee	City of Sanford	\$331,063
Beaufort	Beaufort Co. Water Dis. 5	\$2,953,000	Lenoir	Town of LaGrange	\$400,000
Bertie	Town of Windsor	\$400,000	Lenoir	Neuse Rgnl. W/S Authority	\$400,000
Bertie	Town of Aulander	\$197,000	Martin	Town of Robersonville	\$40,000
Bladen	Town of Bladenboro	\$39,920	Montgomery	Town of Biscoe	\$35,960
Bladen	Town of White Lake	\$39,920	Pamlico	Pamlico County	\$40,000
Brunswick	City of Southport	\$400,000	Pamlico	Town of Oriental	\$130,000
Brunswick	Brunswick County	\$400,000	Pender	Highway 117 Sewer Dis.	\$2,774,614
Camden	Camden County	\$40,000	Perquimans	Town of Hertford	\$400,000
Caldwell	Caldwell County	\$20,000	Pitt	Town of Grifton	\$200,000
Cherokee	Town of Andrews	\$26,071	Polk	Town of Tryon	\$40,000
Cherokee	Town of Murphy	\$200,000	Polk	City of Saluda	\$40,000
Chowan	Town of Edenton	\$400,000	Robeson	Robeson County	\$180,000
Columbus	Columbus County	\$35,900	Rockingham	City of Reidsville	\$40,000
Columbus	Town of Lake Waccamaw	\$400,000	Rutherford	Broad River Water Authority	\$26,500
Columbus	Town of Chadbourn	\$396,240	Rutherford	Town of Forest City	\$400,000
Columbus	Town of Boardman	\$3,000,000	Rutherford	Town of Bostic	\$400,000
Dare	Town of Manteo	\$40,000	Sampson	Town of Roseboro	\$40,000
Duplin	Town of Rose Hill	\$267,000	Stanly	Stanly County	\$31,400
Edgecomb	Town of Tarboro	\$40,000	Swain	Swain County	\$400,000
Edgecombe	Water & Sewer District 5	\$40,000	Transylvania	Transylvania County	\$12,400
Edgecombe	Edgecombe W/SDis.1	\$400,000	Tyrrell	Town of Columbia	\$400,000
Edgecombe	Edgecombe W/S Dis.5	\$207,000	Warren	Warren County	\$40,000
Franklin	Town of Bunn	\$150,000	Warren	Town of Macon	\$40,000
Graham	Town of Robbinsville	\$398,315	Wilkes	Wilkes County	\$40,000
Halifax	Town of Scotland Neck	\$40,000	Wilkes	Town of Wilkesboro	\$39,556
Halifax	Town of Enfield	\$40,000	Wilson	Town of Saratoga	\$40,000
Hertford	Hertford County	\$341,000	Wilson	City of Wilson	\$400,000

Looking beyond the five year horizon

β Poverty remains an enduring issue that our rural communities struggle to address. While the issues of joblessness or retraining may be the hot topics of immediate concern, our rural communities indicate that reducing poverty remains among the most important challenges facing the region.

β Serving the growing Hispanic community is also of concern for our rural communities. As our communities strive to meet the most pressing need of all its citizens, often the special concerns that arise from the changing demographics are short changed. While the issue of job creation and education impact all our rural citizens, our rural leaders recognize that the growing Hispanic community will play an increasingly important role in determining the type and scope of community services.

β The need for regional cooperation has emerged as a critical strategy for local, regional, and state leaders as communities struggle to maximize resources and leverage assets. Our rural leaders indicate that this is a key issue as leaders look to create innovative and locally driven initiatives to address the current economic reality but also as they prepare for the future beyond the next five years.

β Rural leaders also called on state leaders to take action by visiting the communities they represent and the listen to the concerns of their constituents. Respondents conveyed the need for state leaders to not only listen but also to support local leaders and acknowledge the important role they play in developing innovative efforts to meet pressing community issues. Furthermore, rural leaders challenged state leaders to support local initiatives not only with words but also with financial resources that would ensure the successful implementation of locally driven initiatives designed to address critical needs.