

## **N. The Rural-Urban Divide**

*Moderator: Marla Calico, IAFE*

- a. Importance of Rural Communities and Agriculture, *Senator Dan Lauwers, Michigan*
- b. One Small Change, *Representative Maggie O'Neil, Maine*
- c. Is Broadband Driving the Urban-Rural Divide? *Representative Beau Baird, Indiana*

### ***Importance of Rural Communities and Agriculture, Senator Dan Lauwers, Michigan***

Senator Lauwers initiated a discussion with participants with his first of four over-arching areas that address the importance of rural communities and agriculture: *human* - the type of people that grow up in rural communities and come out of agriculture. Lauwers finds that the number of people in his district - be they lobbyists or legislators - who tend to be significant achievers, were raised in rural communities or on family farms.

A Wisconsin legislator noted that agriculture composes about 2.5 percent of the US population. In his legislative body agriculture mirrors this percentage. Production agriculture will feed the world. We need to do a much better job of figuring out why rural areas matter. Lauwers responded that if we can define that we can do it. Lauwers continued with *food and fiber* as the second of his categories of importance that provides for the rest of the population at a ratio of 1:165 in the US.

A third factor is *financial impact* on the rural landscape. Banks, hardware stores, equipment dealers, grain elevators and well-built churches thrive in rural communities. A participant suggested including innovation. Farmers have been using GPS and drones as part of their everyday practices for years.

Lauwers presented his final category - *environmental impact*. Oxygen production, water filtration, recharge and reclaim systems have a huge role in communities and entire states and provinces.

A participant contributed an additional category: rural values that are at the heart of democracy in the US and Canada.

### ***Is Broadband Driving the Urban-Rural Divide? Representative Beau Baird, Indiana***

It is important for legislators to understand the driving forces behind the thought processes of millennials for whom broadband is essential. It is an important factor in deciding where they are going to live. A 2016 report by the FCC estimated that 39 percent of rural Americans don't have access to broadband compared to four percent in urban areas. Younger generations equate broadband with other necessities such as rural electrification and running water.

Having contact and connectivity is about more than funny videos and social media. It is important to maintaining businesses. In previous generations, towns started around infrastructure such as river ports and railroads that moved products. When those facilities left, the towns died. If we don't have access to broadband, the same thing will happen in our rural communities. Business location decisions are influenced by the availability of broadband.

We are looking at the wrong cost-drivers in respect to delivering broadband service to that last mile. We need to reverse our thinking to *what is it going to cost our communities if we don't go that last mile*. This will require creativity, collaboration and trust for those collaborations to hold.

A Perdue University report, *Broadband Access Would Be Beneficial to Our Area*, concluded that Indiana alone could reap \$12 billion on the net present value of a twenty-year investment in state rural broadband. That would be a 400 percent return on investment in areas such as healthcare, education, workforce recruitment and development, consumer savings and farm income. A participant commented that many physicians and dieticians in telemedicine are making recommendations to policy makers about farming populations and practices with little knowledge of the subject or inclusion of agricultural entities in those discussions. Another participant stressed the importance of funding connectivity for emergency care, especially for aging populations, and law enforcement.

Farmers use broadband for sensors, GPS and drones to fine-tune their agricultural practices. It enables access to healthcare, homework assignments for students during snow days and workforce development via on-line courses. A participant added that rural areas are also in competition with international entities that are much more competitive in all communication technology sectors.

### ***One Small Change, Representative Maggie O'Neill, Maine***

The Maine legislature adopted a new approach in 2019 to try to bridge the divide between localities and parties. The house speaker and senate president decided to co-mingle seating for this term. Usually the seating positions democrats on one side, republicans on the other side and independents sprinkled between.

O'Neill perceived more cultural division than expected from her newly adjacent colleagues that was reflected in their assumptions about her values and what her community in coastal southern Maine was like. She learned early-on that there were gaps to be bridged in those relationships.

What O'Neill has learned from colleagues about the mixed seating in legislative chambers is that it has provided the chance to form unexpected relationships. That empowers legislators to learn from each other about why they think the way they do and impacts the way they do their business.

The mixed seating has facilitated interactions among legislators that would not have happened otherwise. Legislators acquired more perspectives on bill votes. Divided seating had limited the ability of legislators to connect with colleagues other than those on the same committees and caucuses, resulting in a pack mentality. Legislators need to take a hard look at their role when they speak with one another, the public, the press and social media. They need to emphasize areas of agreement among legislators and discourage the public's tendency to use them as scapegoats.

A participant commented that in his state the ethics laws have diminished the opportunities to associate with colleagues outside the normal work setting and get to know them as people. Another participant added that term limits also limit these opportunities even though his legislature has interspersed seating. Another commented that rural legislators need to explain to their urban colleagues how different their lives would be without the agricultural sector. An Indiana participant mentioned the state's rural caucus that is neither partisan nor rural based.