House of Representatives
Rural Development Council

Final Recommendations Overview

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The Honorable Lynn Smith
Representative, 70th District

2019

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Introduction

The House Rural Development Council (RDC) was reauthorized by House Resolution 214 during the 2019 Legislative Session of the Georgia General Assembly. Created during the 2017 Legislative Session, the RDC has worked to study and develop sound policy and legislation over the past three years to enhance opportunities for rural Georgia. HR 214 calls on the RDC to continue an intensive study to find solutions for rural Georgia as it pertains to economic development, education and health care. This report contains the recommendations for the third year of the RDC's work performed during the 2019 Interim.

In 2019, the RDC met 10 times in five communities across the state, and heard from local officials and policy experts on a variety of complex issues, including health care, agriculture, transportation, and economic development. Video archives and documentation from each meeting may be accessed on the Georgia House of Representatives website at: http://www.house.ga.gov/Committees/en-US/HouseRuralDevelopmentCouncil.aspx.

The RDC recognizes and honors the work of Chairman Jay Powell, who passed away on November 25, 2019. Chairman Powell was a driving force behind the RDC to ensure rural Georgia has a strong voice in the Georgia House and at the State Capitol. From broadband legislation to health care policy, Chairman Powell helped lead the charge to create a better, brighter future for rural Georgia and all parts of the state.

Recommendations

AGRICULTURE

Individual Quick Freezing

Individual Quick Freezing (IQF) facilities reduce waste and improve efficient distribution of produce, as well as lead to more sales for locally-grown products. IQF facilities can provide a ready-market for Georgia Grown produce and stabilize market prices.

Recommendation

Request the House Agriculture and Consumer Affairs Committee develop legislation to create a study committee that shall:

- Study the need for IQF facilities;
- Determine what legislative and financial requirements are necessary to promote public-private ventures for food processing; and
- Review the agriculture cooperative statute.

Georgia Grown

Georgia farmers are suffering from unfair trade practices and competition with foreign countries; central and South American food prices are lower than domestic produce due to weak wage and health standards. In order to open up new markets and expand existing ones, several state agencies should review current rules and regulations, and work in tandem on programs and projects.

Recommendation

Require the Georgia Department of Public Health, the Georgia Department of Agriculture, the Georgia Department of Education, and the Georgia Department of Administrative Services to:

- Review all statutes, rules, regulations, and policies that regulate the purchase and use of Georgia farm products;
- Determine available resources and remove barriers for Georgia farmers and food processors to create new and expanded markets.
- Develop a report by June 1, 2020 to deliver to the chairmen of the House Rural Development Council.

Uniform Provisions

With 56 counties out of compliance with Georgia Code Section 12-6-24 relating to notice of timber harvesting operations, the timber and logging industry is facing permitting, bonding, and extraneous requirements that are hindering the industry's competition with other states. The Georgia Forestry Association and the Association County Commissioners of Georgia are working together to come up with possible solutions to create uniformity throughout the state.

Recommendation

Pass legislation that will create uniformity of harvesting and transportation of timber throughout the state.

Building Code

Europe has been using mass timber in construction for the past 10 years, with the Pacific Northwest also utilizing this form of construction. While there are several projects that have utilized mass timber in Georgia, an early analysis and adoption of the mass timber portion of the International Building Code may incentivize the use of mass timber and open new markets for Georgia's forestry industry.

Recommendation

Encourage the use of mass timber in the state by the early analysis and adoption of the mass timber update to the International Building Code.

Flexible Capital

With the apparent success of the Georgia Agribusiness and Rural Jobs Act (GARJA) and understanding of the continued need for capital investment in rural Georgia for companies that do not qualify for traditional financing, the House Rural Development Council supports continued access to flexible capital for businesses in rural Georgia.

Recommendation

The Rural Development Council supports the continued access to flexible capital for businesses in rural Georgia.

BROADBAND

**Broadband service is a key foundational piece to most rural development initiatives. The late Chairman Jay Powell led the charge for broadband expansion in the state, laying the foundation for future health and economic development services across rural Georgia.*

Broadband Funding

The Georgia Department of Community Affairs' broadband mapping pilot program shows that federal broadband maps vastly overstate broadband access in rural Georgia. With an expected completion of the mapping program of mid-2020, the state will be able to target funding for broadband. Without a new funding stream, the Georgia Environmental Finance Authority's funding parameters potentially could be expanded to affect broadband deployment.

Recommendation

Explore possibilities of expanding GEFA's funding parameters to include broadband deployment.

Local Bonding

Expanding the number of providers in the state will help close the broadband technology gap. During the 2019 Session, the General Assembly passed legislation authorizing electric membership corporations and rural telephone cooperatives to provide broadband services. Some local governments have been providing broadband services for years, and additional local governments could begin or expand their services by financing their networks with local revenue bonds.

Recommendation

Include broadband deployment and operation as economic development areas that can be financed by local revenue bonds.

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Water and Sewer Funding

Much of rural Georgia's water and sewer infrastructure is aging and many local governments may not have the tax base to maintain and upgrade the infrastructure in a timely manner. Additionally, high water rates are increasingly looked upon negatively by ratepayers. The Georgia Environmental Finance Authority is in a position to help fund water and sewer projects, as well as provide expertise in rate planning.

Recommendation

Give rural communities additional weighting in the application process for water and sewer funding within GEFA.

Regional Development Authorities

With a shrinking population and lack of quality assets, some rural counties are struggling to attract new businesses and industries. While many communities have begun to take a regional approach to economic development, an incentive for creating a regional development authority would give rural communities a greater chance of attracting new businesses. In many cases, the key to successful economic development in rural communities is access to adequate medical care.

Recommendation

Incentivize the creation of voluntary regional development authorities, which will consist of a minimum of three counties, and allow regional industrial parks to receive OneGeorgia funding to build and equip a general practitioner medical facility.

Regional Commission Structure

While many regional commissions provide excellent services to their local governments, some have failed to fulfill their mandate. Regional commissions have and will continue to play a crucial part in regional planning and economic development, but some reform is needed to ensure the best outcome for rural communities.

Recommendation

Reduce the size of regional commissions' board of directors, establish a list of core services a regional commission must perform, and implement performance standards under the oversight of the Department of Community Affairs.

Solar Farms

Community solar projects provide a dual benefit to rural communities in that they allow the diversification of operations for local citizens in a new clean industry and they generate

increased tax revenue for local governments; however, there is concern about the solar farms after the technology is outdated. A report on decommissioning plans of solar farms will be useful for future planning purposes.

Recommendation
Request the Public Service Commission submit a report regarding decommissioning of solar panels to the General Assembly by June 1, 2020.

Trade License Reciprocity
The state of Georgia has entered into several interstate license compacts that allow professionals licensed in other states to practice in Georgia under various circumstances. In order to decide if professionals licensed in other states should receive a reciprocity agreement, a report on existing agreements and suggestions for alterations would be useful.

Recommendation
Request the Secretary of State submit a report regarding professional license reciprocity agreements and fee structures to the General Assembly by June 1, 2020. The report should include:

- Existing reciprocity agreements;
- Suggestions for new reciprocity agreements; and
- Suggestions for alterations to the fee schedules that would incentivize licensed professionals to serve rural Georgia.

EDUCATION

Apprenticeship Programs
Students learn best when they have hands-on experience. The state, local school systems, and higher learning institutions have worked tirelessly to develop apprenticeship programs and applied-learning scenarios to allow students to gain experience and learn new interests. These types of programs are essential for rural Georgia's economic development and workforce development plans.

Recommendation
Continue to fund and implement the creation of apprenticeship programs and applied-learning scenarios with high schools and postsecondary education centers in partnership with industry groups.

Small Class Sizes
Rural Georgia technical colleges experience smaller class sizes for various degree paths more than their more urban counterparts; yet these degree paths may be critical to the economic and

workforce development of a small community. However, technical colleges are challenged to generate enough funds to pay an instructor's salary when class sizes are small.

Recommendation
In order to address this problem quickly, the RDC recommends the following:

- Allow businesses to endow technical college foundations with supplemental salary funds; and
- Create a program modeled after Quick Start to allow for targeted community needs-based response.

HEALTH CARE

Rural Physician Tax Credit
Rural physician recruitment and retention is essential to a local community's health outcomes, as well as its workforce and economic development. Georgia has acted to improve recruitment and retention for the past two decades, including the use of the rural physician tax credit which has been on the books since 1995.

Recommendation
Update the rural physician tax credit to include other medical professionals, such as nurse practitioners and physician assistants.

Residency Incentives
Expert testimony and research shows that students are more likely to reside and serve in the community in which they complete their medical residency program. It would be beneficial to Georgia's rural areas if state-funded residency programs give added preference to native Georgians, particularly rural students.

Recommendation
Require more weight be given to Georgia students when selecting applicants for residency programs.

Physician Placement and Tracking
The state has many programs aimed at recruiting and retaining rural health care professionals. In order to determine if the state's programs are having an effect, the Georgia Board of Health Care Workforce (GBHCW) should track graduates following their graduation and up to 10 years after.

Recommendation
Require the GBHCW to track graduates for up to 10 years upon their placement in a rural community, in addition to requiring GBHCW to create a portal allowing the Georgia Rural Health Innovation Center to access such information.

Succession Planning
Nine counties in the state have no physician, while another seven counties only have one physician. Moreover, 384 rural physicians plan to retire in the next five years, with projections showing the state may need to replace 1,300 physicians in the next 10 to 15 years. Many communities do not know they may soon be faced with a physician shortage. Succession planning is essential to future health outcomes.

Recommendation
Encourage the Georgia Rural Health Innovation Center to implement a succession planning program for rural physicians and other medical professionals in rural Georgia, which can be used as a resource for rural communities.

Clinical Behavioral Health Provider
Mental health and substance abuse disorders are of great importance in health care. With a shortage of licensed clinical behavioral health providers in the state, these issues are growing worse. The state has worked to alleviate several medical health care professional shortages through the Physicians for Rural Areas Assistance (PRAA) loan repayment program. Additionally, the National Health Service Corps Loan Repayment Program (NHSC) has worked to improve the clinical health shortage in rural America.

Recommendation
Add clinical behavioral health providers to the current Physicians for Rural Areas Assistance (PRAA) loan repayment program under the Georgia Board of Health Care Workforce.

Psychiatric Residency Program Funding
The need to fill the psychiatry gap in rural Georgia is paramount, as behavioral and mental health illnesses compound other rural health care issues. There are 2.3 million Georgians with mental illness in the state and 84 of the state's 159 counties have no psychiatrist. The state ranks 47th out of 50 states for access to mental health care. A psychiatric residency program would help close the access gap facing many rural Georgians.

Recommendation
Establish a state psychiatric residency program.

School Social Workers

School social workers are first-responders to the growing mental health issues that students are experiencing. Many of these students have suicide ideation issues. These complex issues require a great deal of training and expertise, which the state can help provide.

Recommendation

Establish partnerships between state agencies, specifically DFCS and DBHDD, and local school systems to cross-train licensed clinical social workers in schools.

School-based Health Centers

School-based health centers can ensure students and their families receive much needed primary care and behavioral health services. By partnering with federally qualified health centers (FQHCs) or the Department of Public Health, school systems can serve a vital community need, in addition to ensuring students receive adequate health services.

Recommendation

Encourage schools to develop school-based health centers, including the use of telemedicine, in partnership with FQHCs or the Department of Public Health. Telemedicine services should utilize available local resources.

Remote Patient Monitoring

More than 100 hundred million Americans suffer from one or more chronic illnesses, which is a key factor driving the overall increase in health care spending. Remote patient monitoring platforms allow virtual care of patients, which can help bridge the health care access gap in rural Georgia. Moreover, remote monitoring can lead to a reduction in emergency department visits and readmission rates.

Recommendation

Recommend that the Subcommittee on Appropriations for Health study the issue of remote patient monitoring.