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Reviving rural S.C. a vital task

BY CHARLES LANE and BERNIE MAZYCK

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We were encouraged to learn that Gov. Nikki Haley attended the recent South Carolina Rural Summit in Newberry. The governor was right to cite the vital role rural communities can play in restoring South Carolina's economy.

We also hope Gov. Haley appreciates that it will take much more than beautification projects to address the challenges facing our rural communities. While the high poverty and unemployment rates in these areas have been exacerbated by the recession, they predate it: They are the long and unfortunate legacy of generations of failed leadership and policies. Indeed, when speaking about poverty in South Carolina, the relevant comparison is not between our state and other states, but between the rural and urban communities within South Carolina itself.

The unemployment rate in our 11 most distressed counties averages over 16 percent, almost double the rate of our six most developed counties. Our three most prosperous counties are home to 40 percent of all bank deposits, totalling nearly \$28 billion. Meanwhile, our 11 most distressed counties have less than four percent of all deposits, only \$2.6 billion.

We need to shift the paradigm on promoting rural economic development. The economic model that has worked well in our urban cities has not succeeded in our rural areas. This model was centered on attracting outside businesses to relocate to our rural areas.

For a time, lured by tax breaks and the promise of cheap labor and energy, manufacturing businesses gained a foothold in rural S.C. Those days are over. The same incentives that brought those industries here have taken them to China. Perversely, many state leaders keep trying to recruit outside businesses to rural communities. Rural communities then waste precious revenues trying to keep these businesses, building roads, water and sewer lines to industrial parks that are soon vacated. What if, instead, we envisioned building wealth from within? There are exciting trends taking place all around our country, and in rural South Carolina that focus on ways to generate and circulate wealth inside local economies. They include local food markets that bring farmers into direct contact with consumers; home weatherization projects that lower utility bills and create local jobs; and conservation easements that help landowners invest in their farming and forestry operations.

What do these successful efforts have in common? First, they are oriented toward long-term, sustainable economic growth. Second, they take an integrated, holistic approach to economic development. Third, they reflect the values and knowledge of entrepreneurs and community leaders willing to break with past practices and seek a new way forward.

Building wealth from within means looking at the whole picture. Farmers cannot sell their produce directly without considering processing and marketing concerns. Weatherizing homes requires creative loan financing and stringent energy audits to prioritize projects. Conserving our best farms and forests means analyzing everything from soil quality to transportation concerns.

Our state has not adequately developed the technological and human resources to help rural communities build wealth from within. Capable, creative and hardworking rural leaders are therefore taking the lead, actively networking to create sustainable development plans, apply for federal loans and grants, and lobby for better policies at the Statehouse. They have long appreciated that we need a new vision that involves the participation of all constituencies of rural communities, from business entrepreneurs to churches, from schoolteachers to health professionals, from local administrators to nonprofit organizations.

Thanks to their efforts, a statewide coalition is now forming dedicated to creating an integrated, comprehensive vision for rural prosperity. The goal is to help rural communities coordinate efforts around a cluster of emerging and interdependent opportunities, including clean energy, sustainable food markets, outdoor tourism and affordable housing.

Gov. Haley, we would like to share this plan with you and work together on promoting it. Your own roots in rural South Carolina means you have valuable insights to share. We look forward to hearing them.

Charles Lane is broker-in-charge of Holcombe, Fair, and Lane and chairman of the ACE Basin Task Force. Bernie Mazyck is president and CEO of the S.C. Association of Community Development Corporations.

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