Rural county innovation, collaboration discussed at forum

NACo president-elect points out examples of effective rural-urban partnerships

BY ERIK JOHNSTON
COMMUNITY SERVICES ASSISTANT

NACo President-elect Colleen Landkamer and member county, Miner County, S.D., both provided examples of promoting rural innovation at the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s (USDA) 2006 Agricultural Forum, Feb. 16–17, held in Arlington County, Va.

The 2006 conference theme was “Prospering in Rural America.” The discussions and workshops shifted from solely farm issues to a comprehensive dialogue on economic development in rural areas.

Landkamer represented NACo at the conference and spoke about the importance of regional collaboration and counties’ role in rural innovation during a session entitled “Collaboration in Support of Rural Communities.” Meanwhile, Miner County’s innovative rural economic development strategies were discussed in depth as a national model during a separate session.

Rural-urban collaboration

Landkamer emphasized the significance of rural-urban collaboration during a panel session that focused on cooperation and partnership building. She mentioned NACo’s strides to foster a rural-urban dialogue through the Large Urban County Caucus (LUCC) and the Rural Action Caucus (RAC).

“For way too long, the issue of rural and urban has been divisive — an ‘us-versus-them’ mentality. Only recently at NACo have we started to break down these silos and really look for partnering opportunities with county officials regardless of the population limits,” she said.

She then gave two examples of effective rural-urban partnerships. First, she asserted that the lobbying partnership between rural and urban counties was crucial to the recent re-authorization of the federal highway program. Second, counties of all sizes have worked together to put the issue of methamphetamine abuse in the national spotlight. Counties led the nation in helping to dispel the myth that meth abuse was only a rural problem.

Miner County, S.D.: rural development

Miner County’s transition from economic decline and stagnation to economic stability has thrust this county of 2,884 people into the national spotlight. Its innovative model of rural development led to positive coverage in the Wall Street Journal and was highlighted by Karl Stauber, president and CEO of the Northwest Area Foundation, during a panel discussion at the recent USDA forum.

According the Stauber, the key to Miner County’s success can be summed up in one word, vision.

It was the county’s youth that first realized the status quo was not going to halt the massive exodus of people from this agriculturally dependent county that reached its highest population in 1960 at 5,040 people.

The local school district received an Annenberg Rural Challenge Grant in 1995 that enabled community visioning meetings. Youth were the catalyst for this project, but the energy of the visioning sessions soon grew. A county task force sprung out of the process and eventually formalized economic development and beautification as top county priorities.

The county’s new shared vision of the future enabled it to receive additional grant funding to form Miner County Community Revitalization (MCCR), a nonprofit organization that grew out of the original visioning task force. The Northwest Area Foundation, based in St. Paul, Minn., continues to fund MCCR, and has helped the county create an environment that is fertile for niche entrepreneurs.

MCCR does not invest resources into redeveloping fading sectors of its economy. Instead, it has focused on building a diversified economic sector with various small niche businesses.

For example, the old slaughterhouse was reopened and now produces organic beef. The county also developed wind turbines through a public-private venture that decreased the energy costs that typically put rural communities at a competitive disadvantage in luring industry. The promotion of rural health care has also been at the forefront of economic development efforts. The last remaining community dentist stayed and expanded his office because MCCR helped him obtain federal grants that supplemented his business.

Perhaps most helpful is MCCR’s revolving loan fund for business development and expansion. The county continues to use this and other tools to realize its vision of increased economic activity.

Miner County continues to foster this vision through its various ventures to realize a diverse, rural entrepreneurial economy.

(For additional information about Miner County’s economic development initiatives, visit www.mccr.net. For more information on NACo’s Networks for Rural Policy Development project, contact Erik Johnston, community services assistant at ejohnston@naco.org or 202/942-4246. To access NACo’s Rural County Governance Center, visit NACo’s Web site at www.naco.org/techassistance and click on Special Information Centers.)