

STAFF REPORT

Rural Prosperity: Making Choices for Your Community

**Public Forum
February 22, 2005
Dabney S. Lancaster Community College**

While many rural communities made progress during the economic boom of the 1990s, their progress often did not keep pace with their urban neighbors. What can communities do to help ensure their future prosperity? The Southern Growth Policies Board, a regional public policy think tank, has created materials to help communities plan their future and discuss possible approaches in a public forum setting.

The Southern Growth Policies Board is a unique public-private partnership devoted to strengthening the South's economy. Formed by the region's governors in 1971, Southern Growth provides its members, and the region, with authoritative research, discussion forums and pilot projects in the areas of globalization, technology and innovation, workforce development and the vital role of the community. To learn more about Southern Growth Policies Board, visit www.southern.org.

The Roanoke Valley-Alleghany Regional Commission invited policymakers in the Alleghany Highlands to participate in a brainstorming session on policies the state and federal governments can take to promote rural prosperity. This invitation-only session took place on February 22, 2005 in Clifton Forge, Virginia. Dabney S. Lancaster Community College hosted the event. The forum was attended by 23 policymakers with various backgrounds including local government, healthcare, education, and business. Communities throughout the South are holding similar public forums to discuss rural development opportunities and challenges.

The forum presentation materials and results are attached. The input received at this gathering will be included in the Southern Growth Policies Board annual *Report on the Future of the South*, a high-profile series designed to help drive policy action throughout the southeast. The report will be released at the Summit on the Rural South in Point Clear, Alabama, June 12-14.

Rural Prosperity: Making Choices for Your Community



Sponsored by:
Roanoke Valley-Alleghany Regional Commission
in conjunction with the Southern Growth Policies Board

Dabney S. Lancaster Community College
February 22, 2005

Today's Agenda

- Welcome
- Pre-Forum Questionnaire
- What is the Roanoke Valley-Alleghany Regional Commission
- What is the Southern Growth Policies Board
- Lunch
- Making Choices for Your Community
- Post-Forum Questionnaire
- Conclusion

Purpose of the Forum

- Communities throughout the South are holding public forums to discuss rural development opportunities and challenges.
- The input from these community meetings will be used in developing Southern Growth's 2005 "Report on the Future of the South."
- The forum is intended to create an ongoing discussion of community issues that can be used in the update of the Alleghany Highlands Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy.

What is the Roanoke Valley-Alleghany Regional Commission?

The purpose of Planning District Commissions, as set out in the *Code of Virginia*, Section 15.2-4207, is

... to encourage and facilitate local government cooperation and state-local cooperation in addressing on a regional basis problems of greater than local significance. The cooperation resulting from this chapter is intended to facilitate the recognition and analysis of regional opportunities and take account of regional influences in planning and implementing public policies and services.

The planning district commission shall also promote the orderly and efficient development of the physical, social and economic elements of the district by planning, and encouraging and assisting localities to plan, for the future.

Roanoke Valley-Alleghany Regional Commission

- Political subdivision of the Commonwealth chartered under the Regional Cooperation Act
- 21 Planning Districts in Virginia
- Composed of elected officials and citizens appointed by member local governments
- PDCs provide a variety of technical and program services to member local governments
- Provide assistance to member localities including grant application assistance, management services for program implementation, land use planning services and mapping.
- Transportation planning including highway development, ridesharing, airport planning, and specialized transit.
- Serves as the Affiliate State Data Center



What is the Southern Growth Policies Board?

- Public-Private Partnership
- Formed by the region's Governors in 1971
- Mission is to strengthen the South's economy
- Provides research, discussion forums and pilot projects
- Globalization, technology and innovation, workforce development and role of the community



southern growth policies board
making southern prosperity with innovation and collaboration

Issues Related to Rural Communities in the Changing Economy

How active a role do you think the government should play in encouraging entrepreneurship? Do you think that people in the Allegheny Highlands see entrepreneurship as a job option in their future?

- Job Option Here Rather than at VA Tech?
- Most do not see entrepreneurship as a viable option.
- Many have the dream but do not have focus and are not prepared.
- Learning opportunities are important (seminars in high schools and at Dabney).
- Small percentage have wherewithal to follow-through.
- Rural communities do not have support structure; barriers need to be broken down.
- Government is limited in what it can do, but it should help as much as it can. We should not ignore our homegrown options, our entrepreneurs.
- Some in the region see entrepreneurship as option– they have determination. Need training seminars. Lack options. The Highlands region is a small business community.
- Development of incubator will help provide support.
- We need to create a business environment with tax structure and policy. It is not just a government effort.
- Entrepreneur Resource Center helps provide some support now.

What major changes, if any, have taken place in your community over the past 20 years?

- Decreasing population and the population is older.
- More people are technology savvy.
- Region relied upon three major manufacturers (Westvaco., Hercules, etc.) and they employ less and less. We must rely upon small business or less the region may become a bedroom community. Government should support small bus.
- Allegheny foundation has supported econ. Dev. With grants.
- Grants have largely dried up.
- ARC helps support many communities, but this community is not considered distressed and many funding agents may not look here first. There is still need. If MeadWestvaco were to go, it would be disastrous. This region could make a big diff with resources.
- Installation of fiber optic; Clifton Forge became a part of County (new opportunities for sharing res.)
- Industrial park and new schools (good location)
- Establishment of EDC; regional cooperation.
- Diversification of economic base is important. We must determine priorities for investment.
- Trying to take care of infrastructure.

Should rural communities "reinvent" themselves, even if it means letting go of some of the things that helped create that community?

- Yes. We need to build on our past, but build to the future. Railroads will never be what they were, but we might be able to tap into interest in railroads, for instance. Capitalize on assets.
- "Reinvent" is wrong word; it should be "revitalize." Communities should adapt.
- Diversification is another important step.
- We want to keep what makes us unique, but we also need to keep up economically. No cookie cutter solution.
- Community has never capitalized on natural assets. Tourism will be important in future.
- We can't bring back railroads and manufacturing, but we can make this a center for rail artifacts and railroad buffs. Tap into historical tourism and ecotourism.
- Some effort needs to go into making folks proud of their community - build enthusiasm and a sense of community.
- There is an image issue. We need to address liabilities as well as assets. Most people do not want to be here (because of image problem). Many do not know about beauty of area.
- If you want what nature has provided and a great place to raise a family, the Highlands is a good choice. If we provide infrastructure,

What types of economic development activities would have the greatest impact on the economic future of the Allegheny Highlands and should be strongly promoted (for example, attraction of manufacturing activities, encouraging entrepreneurship and small business development, promotion of tourism)?

- In the past when a company chose to relocate, they chose areas by a method (how close are highways, airports?) flying over area. Now they use internet. Internet is tremendous asset for econ. Development. We can't sit back and hope people come. Congressman Boucher has said that web is the key. We have highways, mild climate, Greenbriar and Homestead, Roanoke (need to support airport), highways (need to support highway expansions). We must sell ourself by using technology.
- Time to court potential clients has been diminished. Industrial recruitment should not be first priority; existing business should be first priority.
- Traveling tourism and workforce development are important initiatives. Development of small business incubator is another important step. Most businesses that grow in incubator stay in community.
- How do we get visitors from Homestead, Greenbriar to stop in our area. We need to capitalize on who we are. One good thing is that we do not have racial problems here.
- More celebrating and less complaining.

Investing In The Basics: The Need For Better Infrastructure

Think about the quality and availability of infrastructure (i.e., infrastructure relates to things such as water and sewer, highway and public transit improvements, telecommunications) in your community. What, if anything, needs improvement or is not currently available at all?

- Public transportation (virtually nonexistent). RADAR will be expanding, but it is an issue. Would be hard to start (fuel rates).
- Housing – nice, affordable housing. Hard to find.
- Four lane highway connecting Roanoke and Highlands.
- Multiple real estate listings.
- Housing will be developed when people come; lots of nice housing but few can afford them. Lack of jobs is problem.
- Realtors were contacted to work on multiple listings issue, but response was low. ("greed factor"). Must have cooperation with larger orgs.
- Telecommunications are becoming key to development. We have knowledge base, but infrastructure needs to be constructed.
- Water & Sewer – changes at fed. And state level has led to higher scrutiny at local level.
- Need to be strategic.
- Natural Gas

Do you think the Allegheny Highlands is isolated? If so, how can the area overcome this isolation?

- A lot of State's energy has gone to solve problems in Southside, but we still need help. Population loss has been devastating to region.
- Internet helps remove isolation problem. We need to focus on telecommunications. Technology will help overcome isolation.
- Not isolated in terms of transportation.

It's typically more expensive to provide infrastructure - water and sewer line, telecommunications – to sparsely populated rural areas than to more densely settled communities. Do you think such investments are a good use of government funds? Why or why not?

- Most importantly a plan must be established for investment. Plan should be strategic and regional in focus. Utility rates must be examined (methods for controlling them).
- It is a good investment.
- Community can be judged in how it provides services to residents.
- Infrastructure should be provided to facilitate growth. Investments should be made while means and resources are available.
- Plan is critical; communication to constituency that it is good investment is key.

Regional Collaboration

What benefits, if any, do you think the community would gain from building relationships with neighboring communities?

- Cost-sharing
- Out-of-the-box ideas
- Access to ear of legislators
- Share resources
- Secondary benefit of a neighbor's success
- Bond issues – cooperating to help take advantage
- Sharing information
- Become each other's customers

Do you feel that the communities of the Allegheny Highlands have good working relationships?

- Getting better – problem over the years, competitive spirit in the past.
- Roots of competition are deep. It is important to understand benefits of cooperation.
- Relationship needs constant attention

Are the communities of the Allegheny Highlands building good relationships?

-

What unique assets or strengths might be combined on a regional basis in the Allegheny Highlands?

- Distribution centers could be an important asset (what do our existing bus. need?)
- Educational systems
- Enterprise zone
- Dabney Lancaster Comm. College
- Labor Force
- Tourism Opportunities
- Regional Marketing Strategy
- Solid Waste Management
- Regional Housing Strategy
- Parks and Recreation (lots of facilities)

Do you see any barriers or challenges to cooperation between communities in your region?

- Old school mentality; competitive spirit. Some animosity.
- These types of rivalries if not overly done can be great, though! Sense of community.
- We need to educate community so that there is continuity between boards and councils over time.
- Need to understand community is guiding force.

Should rural communities join with their neighbors to develop a regional identity, even if it means losing some of their individual identity?

- We need to consider who our neighbors are - not just Roanoke but Lexington, also. We might need to go in other directions as well.
- Allegheny Highlands wasn't always an accepted term; we need to expand on that regional spirit.
- You don't have to lose uniqueness in losing identity.

Conclusion

- Complete the post forum questionnaire
- Results will be sent to local governing bodies and today's participants and will be used in updating the Highland's CEDS
- Results of the forum will be a part of Southern Growth Policies Board annual "Report on the Future of the South" to be released at the Summit on the Rural South in Point Clear, Alabama, June 12-14.

Rural Prosperity: Making Choices for Your Community
Issues Related to Rural Communities in the Changing Economy
Regional Forum held at Dabney Lancaster Community College
February 22, 2005

Issues Related to Rural Communities in the Changing Economy

How active a role do you think the government should play in encouraging entrepreneurship? Do you think that people in the Alleghany Highlands see entrepreneurship as a job option in their future?

- Citizens need to know that there are entrepreneurship opportunities in the Alleghany Highlands and that they do not have to leave the area to start a business
- Most people do not see entrepreneurship as a viable option. Entrepreneurship is not promoted as a “career” path.
- Many have the dream of becoming an entrepreneur but do not have focus and are not prepared (business plan, available capital, market analysis).
- Learning opportunities about entrepreneurship are important (seminars in high schools and at Dabney S. Lancaster Community College).
- Only a small percentage of entrepreneurs will have wherewithal to follow-through and actually develop a business.
- Rural communities do not have an adequate support structure for entrepreneurs; barriers (training, business incubators, financing) need to be broken down.
- Government is limited in what it can do, but it should help as much as it can. We should not ignore our homegrown options, our entrepreneurs.
- Some in the region see entrepreneurship as an option – they have determination. But, additional training seminars are needed. The Highlands region is a small community and lacks options for entrepreneur markets.
- Development of the proposed Alleghany Highlands business incubator will help provide support to entrepreneurs.
- We need to create a business environment with tax structure and policy that is favorable for small businesses and entrepreneurs. Business development is not just a government effort, it also requires the support of citizens and other businesses.
- The Entrepreneur Resource Center at Dabney S. Lancaster Community College provides support to entrepreneurs and should receive additional support from the state and federal government.
- Small businesses drive our economy. How do you develop businesses

that will stay in the region and how do you support existing businesses?

What major changes, if any, have taken place in your community over the past 20 years?

- More people are technology savvy.
- Region has been reliant on three major manufacturers (MeadWestvaco., Hercules, etc.) and they employ fewer and fewer persons. We must rely upon small businesses or the region may become a bedroom community. Government should support small businesses.
- Decrease in total population and the population is older.
- The Alleghany Foundation, formed when the regional community hospital was sold to a private company, has supported economic development with direct and matching grants.
- Grants from state and federal sources have largely dried up.
- The Appalachian Regional Commission helps support many communities, but the Alleghany Highlands is not considered distressed and is not as competitive for grant funding. Even though the area is not considered distressed based on government standards, there is still a need for financial assistance to provide needed services.
- If MeadWestvaco were to close, it would be disastrous.
- Installation of fiber optic cable in the region is needed.
- Clifton Forge became a part of County and this should provide new opportunities for sharing resources.
- Industrial parks and new schools have been built (good location)
- Establishment of Alleghany Highlands Economic Development Corporation was a positive move.
- Regional cooperation has expanded.
- Diversification of economic base is important.
- We must determine priorities for investment.
- Localities are trying to address infrastructure needs with limited financial resources.
- Alleghany County purchased National Forest property to convert into an industrial park (property back on the local tax rolls).
- Increased collaboration between Covington, Alleghany Co., Clifton Forge, and Iron Gate is evident. We can communicate now. Conversations and cooperation has helped save some jobs.

Should rural communities “reinvent” themselves, even if it means letting go of some of the things that helped create that community?

- Yes. We need to build on our past, but build to the future.
- Railroads will never be what they were, but we might be able to tap into interest in railroads, through tourism for instance.
- The region needs to capitalize on its assets (scenic beauty, railroads, interstate highway).
- “Reinvent” is wrong word; it should be “revitalize.” Communities should adapt to the changing economy.
- Diversification of the economy is another important step.
- We want to keep what makes us unique, but we also need to keep up economically. No cookie cutter solution exists for rural communities.
- This region has never capitalized on its natural assets. Tourism will be important part of the areas economy in the future.
- We can’t bring back railroads and manufacturing, but we can make this a center for rail artifacts and railroad buffs. We need to tap into the market for heritage tourism and eco-tourism.
- Some effort needs to go into making folks proud of their community - build enthusiasm and a sense of community.
- There is an image issue in the Highlands. We need to address the areas liabilities as well as its assets. Most people do not want to be here (because of image problem). Many do not know about the beauty of area. Our image needs to be improved and we need to better market our assets.
- If you want what nature has provided and a great place to raise a family, the Alleghany Highlands is a good place to live. If we provide infrastructure, development will come. If we do not sell ourselves, no one else will!
- Many of us who have lived here all our lives do not realize what we have. We need to educate our residents so we can make best of our assets.
- Visitors are often attracted to areas by brochures or travel magazines. Alleghany Highlands should market itself more.

What types of economic development activities would have the greatest impact on the economic future of the Alleghany Highlands and should be strongly promoted (for example, attraction of manufacturing activities, encouraging entrepreneurship and small business development, promotion of tourism)?

- In the past when a company chose to relocate, they chose areas by a method of flying over area (how close are highways, rail lines, airports?).

Now relocation experts use the internet. The internet is a tremendous asset for economic development. We can't sit back and hope people come. Congressman Boucher has said that the internet is the key to attracting people and jobs. We have good highways, a mild climate, the Greenbriar and Homestead resorts. We must sell ourselves by using technology.

- The amount of time available to court potential clients has been diminished. Industrial recruitment should not be first priority; existing business should be first priority.
- Travel, tourism and workforce development are important initiatives.
- Development of a small business incubator is another important step. Most businesses that grow in an incubator stay in the community.
- How do we get visitors from the Homestead and Greenbriar resorts to stop in our area and spend money?
- We need to capitalize on who we are. One good thing is that we do not have racial problems here.
- The area needs to celebrate its assets more and complain less about what we don't have.
- Cooperation and helping each other is important.

Investing In The Basics: The Need For Better Infrastructure

Think about the quality and availability of infrastructure (i.e., infrastructure relates to things such as water and sewer, highway and public transit improvements, telecommunications) in your community. What, if anything, needs improvement or is not currently available at all?

- Public transportation in the Alleghany Highlands is virtually nonexistent. RADAR (Roanoke Area Dial-A-Ride) will be expanding its existing routes, but it is an ongoing issue. It would be hard to start a public transit system due to dispersed population and escalating fuel rates.
- Housing is an important issue. Nice, affordable housing is difficult to find due to lack of multiple listing service.
- Need to complete the widening of U.S. Route 220 highway to four-lanes to better connect the Roanoke metro area and the Highlands.
- Lack of multiple listing service discourages potential residents from moving to the area.
- Housing will be developed when people come. There is nice housing but few can afford the nicer houses. The lack of good paying jobs is problem.
- Realtors were contacted to work on multiple listings issue, but response

was low (the “greed factor”). We must have cooperation of realtors to develop the MLS.

- Telecommunication infrastructure is becoming key to development. We have knowledge base, but infrastructure needs to be built.
- Water & Sewer – changes at state and federal level have led to higher scrutiny (additional testing, required improvements to technology) and costs of local public utilities.
- We need to be strategic – must have a plan for public infrastructure investments.
- Natural gas is also a required piece of infrastructure for many companies and is not currently available throughout the Alleghany Highlands.

Do you think the Alleghany Highlands is isolated? If so, how can the area overcome this isolation?

- Much of State’s (Department of Economic Development) energy has gone to solve problems in Southside Virginia, but we still need help. Population loss has been devastating to region.
- Internet lessens the isolation problem. We need to focus on telecommunications. Technology will help overcome isolation.
- The region is not isolated in terms of transportation (interstate and railroads).

It’s typically more expensive to provide infrastructure - water and sewer line, telecommunications – to sparsely populated rural areas than to more densely settled communities. Do you think such investments are a good use of government funds? Why or why not?

- Utility rates must be examined (methods for controlling them and level rates across the region).
- It (infrastructure in sparsely populated areas) is a good investment.
- Community can be judged in how it provides services to residents (citizens and businesses deserve services when feasible).
- Most importantly, a plan must be established for investment in infrastructure. The Plan should be strategic and regional in focus.
- Infrastructure should be provided to facilitate growth. Investments should be made while the means and resources are available.
- A plan is critical in order to communicate to constituency that it is good investment.

Regional Collaboration

What benefits, if any, do you think the community would gain from building relationships with neighboring communities?

- Cost-sharing would help save money for tax-payers.
- “Out-of-the-box” ideas might arise. We could benefit from a different point of view and other the experiences and knowledge of other communities.
- We could gain greater access to ears of our state legislators – larger group has more pull at the state capital.
- Sharing resources is important.
- We could share in the benefit of a neighbor’s success – multiplier effect of new jobs and services.
- We could possibly benefit from a regional Bond issuance – cooperating to help take advantage of opportunities for regional bond issues.
- We could share of information and knowledge.
- Become each other’s customers (shopping, public utilities, schools)

Do you feel that the communities of the Alleghany Highlands have good working relationships?

- The relationships are getting better. Strengthening relationships has been a problem over the years because the competitive spirit among the localities in the past has hampered regional efforts.
- Roots of competition are deep. It is important to understand benefits of cooperation.
- Building relationships needs constant attention.

What unique assets or strengths might be combined on a regional basis in the Alleghany Highlands?

- We could promote the area for “distribution centers”. This could be an important asset in addressing our existing business needs.
- Our educational systems are good (highly rated, technologically advanced).
- The Alleghany Highlands Regional Enterprise Zone is an asset.
- Dabney S. Lancaster Community College is a strong asset.
- Our labor force is an asset
- We need to build on our tourism opportunities.
- We need to develop a Regional Marketing Strategy.

- Regional Solid Waste Management is an asset.
- We need to develop a Regional Housing Strategy.
- Our parks and recreation facilities are an asset (many existing facilities).

Do you see any barriers or challenges to cooperation between communities in your region?

- The “old school mentality” and competitive spirit is a barrier. Some animosity remains from past conflicts.
- These types of rivalries, if not overly done, could help build a sense of community.
- We need to educate the community about these issues so that there is continuity between elected boards and councils over time.
- We need to understand that the community at-large is the guiding force.

7. For which type of business or organization do you work?

Government	<u>8</u>	I'm a student	<u>0</u>
Business	<u>7</u>	I'm not currently employed	<u>0</u>
Non-profit	<u>2</u>	Other	<u>1</u>
Educational inst	<u>2</u>	No Answer	<u>2</u>

8. How old are you?

17 or younger	<u>0</u>
18-29	<u>0</u>
30-49	<u>8</u>
50-64	<u>10</u>
65+	<u>3</u>
No Answer	<u>1</u>

9. In which state do you live?

VA	<u>22</u>
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10. In which type of community do you live?

Rural	<u>20</u>
Urban	<u>1</u>
Suburban	<u>0</u>
No Answer	<u>1</u>

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February 24, 2005
Dabney S. Lancaster Community College
Clifton Forge, Virginia

Post-forum Questionnaire (20 completed questionnaires)

1. Which statement best describes your thoughts about what should be done to secure the future of rural communities? (Check one.)

I am not at all sure about what should be done. 0
 I have a general sense of what should be done. 12
 I have a definite opinion about what should be done. 8

2. Do you agree or disagree with the statements listed below?

	Strongly Agree	Somewhat Agree	Somewhat Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Not Sure
Rural communities should band with their neighbors to develop a regional identity, EVEN IF it means losing some of their individual identity.	19	6	0	0	0
Rural communities should reinvent themselves, EVEN IF it means letting go of some of the things that helped build the community.	11	8	0	1	0
Rural communities should make major investments in modern infrastructure EVEN IF it means raising taxes.	12	6	11	0	0

3. Do you favor or oppose each of these actions in your community?

	Strongly Agree	Somewhat Agree	Somewhat Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Not Sure
Coordinate or consolidate services between neighboring communities to achieve economies of scale.	18	2	0	0	0
Teach entrepreneurship skills in K-12 schools.	15	4	0	1	0
Create stronger relationships among businesses.	16	3	0	0	0
Make special efforts to engage immigrants in business and community life.	7	11	1	0	1
Focus the majority of our resources on industrial recruitment.	5	9	4	1	1
Focus the majority of our resources on creating and growing our own businesses.	8	10	1	0	1

4. Are you thinking differently about this issue now that you have participated in the forum?

Yes 7 No 10

5. Do you see ways for people to work on this issue that you didn't see before?

Yes 12 No 5

6. What, if anything might you do differently as a result of this forum? See attached answer summary.

7. What else, if anything, troubles you about the challenges of rural development? See attached answer summary.

Rural Prosperity: Making Choices for Your Community
Attendance List
February 22, 2005

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