

Rural American Renaissance... Make It Real!  
*Moving Forward from Poverty/Illness to Prosperity/Health*

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## **Rural American Renaissance... Make It Real!**

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Today's era feels a little like the Middle Ages as we face social, religious, economic, and political disharmony – and a plague. We are struggling with lack of support for scientific research and a general breakdown in how we do business and how we should care for one another. Necessary work is being neglected.

The challenges seem even stronger in rural America where more than 124 hospitals have closed and 424 are at risk of closure. Where there is a real shortage of health care workers and a lack of needed broadband and Internet capacity. Where the rural-urban gap in life expectancy is real, and the impact on health from COVID-19 is breaking fragile rural health infrastructure. Leaders at all levels of government, business, and education have, for too long, undervalued and under supported rural communities and the health of their citizens.

In the book, "The Great Leveler," the writer Walter Scheidel discusses the consequences of large societal upheavals. In the past, the upheaval caused by plagues and pandemics was often followed by a period of greater equity. Can we see an opportunity for a new reformation arising from today's upheaval? Can we see this as a chance to build a rural renaissance driven in part by telehealth/telemedicine, online education, and urban flight to more rural areas?

Listen carefully, and you can hear the new rural voices and a new rural message. It is a message of hope, a refocus on values, and a declaration of how rural America can and will not only survive but lead in the new world. We believe that we hear the voice of a Rural Renaissance, and we are here to ask the nation to make this renaissance succeed.

Rural America is crucial to our very existence. It is the place where most of our drinking water comes from. It is where our food, our fuel, our fiber, and fish come from. It is the place where people till the earth and real husbandry takes place every day. The caretakers of these places know the value of our earth.

Rural people must plan for and deal with weather and climate changes, whatever their cause. What and when you plant. What and when you harvest. And what and when you must change and adapt to new realities. Lots of real life lessons are taught and learned in these nurturing

places. Lessons of stewardship and conservation that harken back to our first inhabitants and settlers and are still available. Lessons that we mostly dismissed as out of date and not relevant to a modern society.

Rural is the place that reminds us of the importance of words, actions, and relationships. Because everybody knows everybody, everyone must work to build solid, lasting, and helpful relationships. This is a time in our history where that seems to be needed more than ever.

People who live in rural areas know the importance of words used and messages being sent. They know that actions are even more important than words. All this communication takes place in a world of relationships within the family, among neighbors, and in the service area where they work, play, and pray.

Why did we let urbanization and business/industrial models block our view and interest in these sacred rural areas that are close to us? Why did the fast food places and big box stores become a sign of a community's success or failure? Why did we allow our food processing to be moved from where the food is raised and harvested to places hundreds of miles away? Why didn't we see the effect this would have on jobs in our communities?

Why do we have food deserts in our food producing areas? Why do we have food pantries being overrun by rural people needing food? Why are health deserts becoming more common in our nation? What we see now is the shell of past eras where rural work was converted into money and that money made its way around the community.

**This may all sound like a cry to return to an agrarian society of the past, but it is not. It is a call to respect, value, and learn from the past. It is a call to see that a real Rural Renaissance is on the way.**

Rural communities across this country have been taking note of the demographic shift, and many rural leaders are starting local or regional foundations through which people can invest in new and creative projects. Rural schools are finding ways to bring education from around the world to their students. Rural broadband is a hot topic because rural producers' livelihood depends on access to markets, new products, new education, and new ways of production. Community redevelopment is focusing on quality of life to attract business and industry to their area. It is where you will find new regional partnerships that are working on the big issues that states and the federal government are not addressing.

This new Rural Renaissance is affecting seafood, lumber, ranching, farming, and any other type of work in rural and remote areas. Go to any good-sized dairy and see the computers in use every day to track milk production, cow genetics, food protein, and other nutritional qualities. See the drones used now to check on trees, fish, cows, and crops to protect, nurture, and maintain a quality-oriented product. Rural citizens understand the use of digital ecosystems and are asking for the next revolution of service. The entire nation needs that revolution, and we should be creating this change together.

Today we see the real importance of and need for a quality healthcare system that connects all health professionals. Because of COVID-19, we see what happens when we fail to invest in public health and in the science needed to address the next health issues.

We also are very aware that the individual is the big player in any health care redesign. Americans have access to great, researched health and healthcare information, and yet our health is poor by many international standards. Why are we not fully using the knowledge about health and health care that we have in this nation?

We often have put technology in place with little thought about how to pay for it or how necessary it is for optimal health. This would not happen in a world where producers share values regarding investment and where relationships are in place to help them select the best product to purchase and use. They would understand that the whole system must be addressed and cared for.

## **MAKE THIS RURAL RENAISSANCE REAL!**

**1. Urban and rural people, Democrats and Republicans share many common needs, desires, values, and resources.** Today we must focus on the “sense of the common” that still exists in our nation. That sense of the common is particularly strong in rural areas because it is necessary for their very survival. Rural people understand that the real challenge is not about power, money, or dominance. It is about the need of an entire community to address what we share if we are to advance as a society and people. That is how very small rural communities can and do survive.

**2. Our collective mission is to see all communities as places where innovation can and does take place. In rural areas, it often happens because it has to.** Too often, the wider world does not listen to the rural voices that are telling us what they know and value. Leaders at all levels, in all areas, need to hear and take note of the great ideas, inventions, and community models being put into place in rural communities. After they listen, they need to ask what they can do to assist in this evolution and to use those models in any community in America.

**3. Rural is not just a smaller urban. Rural and urban people frequently see the world through different lenses.** Have you thought about those different frames of reference? Practices that work in urban areas often don't work in rural areas because of remoteness, lack of people, and lack of resources. In other words, urban paradigms cannot easily be transplanted to rural communities. As a result, urban people often conclude that rural people must be really behind the curve when, actually, the two groups simply have different frames of reference. Framing and paradigms need to be openly addressed and changed if we are to evolve together. We need bridge makers to help with these change discussions.

**4. Most Americans in both rural and urban settings value work, but, overall, the approach in the two areas may be somewhat different.** The purpose of work in rural areas is to create, nurture, and harvest for the future wellbeing of the biological and human ecosystem, not just to produce a commodity. Work is done with an eye to the relationship between the earth, the water, and the system of life as well as relationships within the broad community. That is why, when tragedy strikes, many neighbors come to help, no matter who is involved or what has happened. Urban and rural must meet and work together to share ideas about how we can work together. Who will be the bridge for those discussions?

**5. Entrepreneurs exist in every rural area and in every rural community. They exist because they are valued and needed.** But the nation often does not see or value rural entrepreneurship as much the digital models, marketing and production models found in urban areas. Wouldn't it be great to have a rural entrepreneurial hall of fame with yearly inductees, focusing on the rural creations in health delivery, telehealth, climate, livestock, and other food production models?

**6. Leadership is easy to talk about but often hard to do.** If the nation is to get behind a Rural Renaissance, both rural and urban leaders must be willing to set aside their personal agendas, their negative rural frames, and their structural paradigms to facilitate this new world that is starting to evolve in rural America. The interdependence between rural and urban is very real. Preserving rural vitality should be seen in the self interest of urban partners as well as the very need of a nation to work together for the common good. It will take listening. It will take acceptance. It will take agreeing on a set of principles that can help everyone move forward. It will take words that are true, meaningful, and trustworthy. It will take actions that show connectedness and shared effort. It will take relationships that are real, jointly created, and strong enough to weather the challenges that will come.

We invite you to go to [www.healthierruralamerica.org](http://www.healthierruralamerica.org) and read about our rural strategic plan that is part of the work we need to do together for this renaissance in rural America. In addition, you will find opinion pieces that can help you focus on the values, the issues, and the partnerships that will be needed.

**Healthier Rural America is embarking on this Rural Renaissance. Are you ready?**

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