

Heartland Rural Assistance Program

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July 26, 2005

Mr. Mike Johanns, US Secretary of Agriculture
USDA, Washington, DC

Dear Mr. Secretary,

I thank you for the opportunity to share my thoughts in the two-minute presentation at the town hall meeting in Minot on July 26th. It is a privilege to speak about providing assistance to rural America through the assistance of the Rural and Farm programs. I previously heard you speak to the Rural Leadership North Dakota participants during January of 2005, during their Washington, DC tour; just a week or so after you had taken over as Secretary of Agriculture. I was fortunate to be a participant in that program, and feel it has helped me to better understand how strong, positive leadership can make a difference for rural communities.

This letter is to provide additional information about my request to focus on building leadership capacity in rural communities. Also included in this packet of information are some success stories within our region and how some of the rural communities are able to build their leadership capacity, and how this is affecting their survival and growth.

My passion is helping rural communities survive and grow. The purpose of my consulting business is to provide technical assistance to rural communities to help them identify and implement their community economic development priorities. I want to know that when I die, I will have made a difference in the survival of the communities I work with. Building leadership capacity is not an easy or quick thing to do, and there is a need for sustained funding options to help do this. I have worked with a program that provided funds for about 18 months to do this, and that was just not long enough. I truly believe it takes about three years to identify, educate and encourage leadership in a community, and would suggest that funding be made available for this time frame to develop the leadership capacity in rural communities.

If sustainability and growth are to take place, it has to come from within, but utilizing outside resources for help. I have experienced time and again, that successful communities have committed local leaders, who are not afraid to take some risks, and who encourage partnerships with resources outside their local community. This confidence and knowledge takes time to build, and is not inherent in many local leaders in our rural communities, but it can be developed.

If there would be an opportunity to work with your staff in Washington DC to address this issue, I would be very happy to offer my time and efforts to do so, and know that I could identify other leaders in the state who would be willing to help as well. Please feel free to contact me any time if you have questions, comments or would like additional information.

I truly believe that if the rural communities are going to survive, they need to have proactive local leadership in place. They also need to have regional, state and federal partners who can provide resources of all kinds to help them develop their priorities and implement them for success. This is not just a North Dakota issue, but is prevalent in many rural and urban communities throughout the United States. Many urban communities and more populated states have resources that they can tap into in their regions, but the rural communities are very dependent on the funds available from USDA-Rural Development and many times it is their only funding option. If they are going to survive, they need your agency's help, but it needs to be focused in areas where it will get the most "bang for the buck" and I truly believe that building leadership capacity will help the communities long-term, so they have the knowledge and capacity to grow and sustain them.

Respectfully yours,

Becky J. Meidinger

Becky J. Meidinger, Development Specialist

Mr. Secretary, distinguished guests and ladies and gentlemen –

I am Becky Meidinger and I represent several rural communities in the South Central region of North Dakota. I am consultant for community economic development and the coordinator for the Dakota Heartland Champion Community, a USDA designated zone established to address economic development in our region. I also provide technical assistance to rural communities throughout the state, to address their community economic development needs. I am very familiar with many of the USDA-Rural Development funding programs and have used several of them in my work.

How can USDA provide effective assistance to rural areas? I have only one answer. Build leadership capacity in rural communities. Rural communities who are surviving and growing have leadership that is progressive, active and committed. They work together to address the community issues and are willing to partner with outside resources to find the answers. The communities I work with who are not doing a good job of surviving, much less growing, are dealing with leadership that lacks vision, commitment, who are afraid to take risks. They are waiting for a savior, not realizing that to experience success, it initially has to come from within.

I would strongly suggest that a focus of the USDA programs in the future is to address the building of leadership capacity, and providing funds for entities and communities who have shown success in building leadership capacity, and using these programs as pilot programs for other communities. Farmers and town people need to work together to build their community's future. Without the commitment of time, talents and resources, their communities will go by the wayside like so many rural communities have in the past. We need to build from within and partner with USDA to bring about a rural revival. Without the vision and commitment from local leaders, it will not matter how much money is put into the system for projects, they will not be sustainable. We can help rural America most effectively by developing leadership capacity.

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