

Texas Rural Innovators Forum

By Rachael Pitts

TML Assistant Director of Member Services

Rural and *innovation* are words that aren't commonly used together. Amid discussions about the knowledge economy and the creative class, rural leaders may wonder, "Where does my small city a hundred miles from nowhere fit into this conversation?"

In the fall of 2006, TML joined with other organizations dedicated to the success of rural Texas and combined efforts to show that *rural* and *innovation* are not incompatible. The Texas Rural Innovators Forum (TRIF) was the result. TRIF is a forum in which local leaders and their supporting organizations come together with true rural innovators from across America to get new ideas, share experiences, and support one another.

The forum's creator and coordinator is Bobby Gierisch, who brings with him a wealth of rural experiences. Born in Ponder, Texas (current population 900), Bobby worked on rural policy for former Speaker of the Texas House Pete Laney and went on to work with the Rural Policy Research Institute.

TRIF held its first forum at the TML headquarters in Austin. Subsequent forums have been held in conjunction with meetings of the Texas Economic Development Council and the Texas Association of Regional Councils. But TRIF's home base is the Riverside Conference Center, a Lower Colorado River Authority (LCRA) facility in Bastrop. There, rural leaders gather to hear from experts and practitioners in rural development.

At TRIF's most recent forum, held on February 6, 2008, a record-setting crowd came to see a panel of state leaders and experts discuss what rural Texas needs most in 2008.

Panelists included Senator Glenn Hegar (R-Katy), Texas AgriLife Extension Director Dr. Ed Smith, Texas Organization of Rural and Community Hospitals President/CEO David Pearson, Coastal Bend College Continuing Education Coordinator Glynis Hulm-Strause, Sweetwater Mayor Greg Wortham, Houston County Judge Lonnie Hunt, former Director of USDA Rural Development Bryan Daniel, and Past President of the National Association of Counties Colleen Landkamer.

At the heart of the panel discussion was the concept of *critical mass*. Panelists stressed the importance of forming partnerships in order to create the critical mass necessary to meet economic development objectives. That can mean forming partnerships with non-profits, community colleges, private businesses, and other local governments to leverage funding, generate attention from state and federal officials, support entrepreneurs, and develop attainable and sustainable projects. In short, rural Texas needs to work cooperatively: think regionally, not individually.

Past forums have been just as eye-opening. For example, in the fall of 2006, attendees heard how a small community in the poorest county in Mississippi developed into the most-



recently selected site of a Toyota plant. This is a city without an Interstate highway, a university, or a lake or similar recreational amenity. How did they do it? A couple of hints: It didn't happen overnight, and it had a lot to do with education and health care.

Another story involves an industrial recruiter who discovered a seemingly invisible, handmade crafts industry scattered throughout the mountains of North Carolina. She then set about revitalizing a regional

economy around those handmade crafts. In the process, the non-profit Handmade in America increased the revenues of thousands of craftspeople and saw businesses created where few had been. It also, and not coincidentally, revitalized a half-dozen or more mountain communities, restoring pride of place and helping them find out who they really were.

Other forum speakers have included the founding director of the North Carolina Rural Economic Development Center, the president of a unique alliance of six community colleges revitalizing the iron ore industry in northeastern Minnesota, the economic developer from Washington's Clallam County, the CEO of a half-billion-dollar development bank in southern Arkansas, and the award-winning mayor of Scottsburg, Indiana (population 6,000).

"These people have a great deal in common—not least of all, a love and commitment to their rural communities and regions," says Gierisch. "We bring them here because of two qualities: innovation and success. They are thinkers with a very practical bent, and they are practitioners leading initiatives with demonstrable success."

The Texas Rural Innovators Forum welcomes anyone interested in improving the quality of life in rural Texas, and especially those leaders, elected and otherwise, from rural regions. TRIF meets six to eight times a year in spring and fall series. Each forum starts at 10:30 a.m. and concludes by 2:30 p.m., so most participants can drive in and out on the same day. There is a registration fee (\$100 for organizations and \$50 for individuals) that covers participation in three forums. For persons traveling more than 100 miles, the registration fee is waived.

The 2008 spring schedule includes the recently concluded February 6 forum, in addition to forums

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What Rural Texas Needs Most in 2008

Summary of February 6, 2008, Panel Discussion

Moderator: Remelle Farrar, Texas Prairie Rivers Association

- 1. Know ourselves.** Rural Texas has a lot to offer. One of the participants, Sen. Glenn Hegar (R-Katy), pointed out the attractiveness of family-oriented, community atmospheres in small cities.
- 2. Build respect.** Rural Texas is worth fighting for, investing in, and deserves respect: respect from those in rural Texas and respect from the rest of the state and nation.
- 3. Redefine community.** "Rural Texas should work collaboratively, except on Friday nights," explained Continuing Education Coordinator for Coastal Bend College Glynis Hulm-Strause, giving high school football rivalry its due credit. And as Greg Wortham, mayor of Sweetwater, put it, "We should have more solutions and less turf." Community doesn't have to stop at the city limit lines. It is time to think regionally to build that critical mass necessary to realize economic development goals.
- 4. Define assets and challenges.** "Before you get started, you have to know where you are going," Dr. Ed Smith, director of the Texas AgriLife Extension Service, commented. Each community in rural Texas needs to identify its strengths and weaknesses before proceeding with any economic development venture.
- 5. Commit long term.** Not every venture will be successful, but to ensure the best chance for sustained success, you have to stick to it long term. But it's important to avoid burnout by making sure you set both short-term and long-term goals. "We need low-hanging fruit to keep the momentum going," explained Colleen Landkamer, past president of the National Association of Counties.
- 6. Promote assets.** Once you rally around your assets, promote them. It is always good to work at mitigating some challenges, but you won't eliminate them altogether. Focus on the good.
- 7. Build infrastructure.** Make sure your city has what it needs to move forward. It is that build-it-and-they-will-come phenomenon. And when we say rural Texas needs infrastructure, we mean high speed Internet access, health care facilities, higher education and vocational training facilities, and more.
- 8. Showcase and leverage assets.** Now that you know what you've got, showcase it and build upon it. Leverage funds, experience, and expertise to build upon your assets.
- 9. Choose what fits.** Look at your assets, and go after what compliments them. Don't fight for something that doesn't make sense for your city.
- 10. Just do it.** Planning alone doesn't make it so. You have to make it happen. As Bryan Daniel, former director of USDA Rural Development, put it, "Rural Texas needs spark." Rural Texas needs spark to get economic development going. That spark can come from leaders who are focused on the future and willing to tackle the tough issues. ★

Small Cities' Corner *(continued from page 7)*

scheduled for March 13, April 15, and May 22.

Partners in presenting the Texas Rural Innovators Forum include the Texas Municipal League, the Texas Association of Counties, the Texas Cooperative Extension, the USDA Rural Development Office, the Office of Rural Community Affairs, the Texas Economic Development Council, Texas Electric Cooperatives, Inc., the Texas Leadership Institute, Citibank, Trust Financial, the Texas Workforce Commission, the Hobby Center for Service at Texas State University, and the Texas Community College Rural Community Development Consortium.

For additional information about TRIF, including how to register, visit www.ruraltx.org, or contact Bobby Gierisch at 512-499-8948 or tex@ruraltx.org. ★

Texas Rural Innovators Forum www.ruraltx.org 2008 Spring Schedule

March 13 – Riverside Conference Center, Bastrop

"What can we do to help ourselves?" It's the question on the minds of rural leaders far and wide. A small city in Georgia decided to tell stories. Karen Kimbrell will tell attendees why and how a story-telling non-profit called Swamp Gravy became the city's engine of social and economic renewal.

April 15 – Riverside Conference Center, Bastrop

Mary Ellen McClanahan directs Georgia's Entrepreneur & Small Business Office. She will discuss the state's entrepreneur-friendly cities program. Also presenting will be Deb Markley, who is co-director of the Rural Policy Research Institute (RUPRI) Center for Rural Entrepreneurship in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. Markley will discuss other ways states and communities are learning to support entrepreneurs.

May 22

Location and program to be announced

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