Louisiana Governor's Advisory Council on Rural Revitalization

STRATEGIC PLAN REPORT

January 2021

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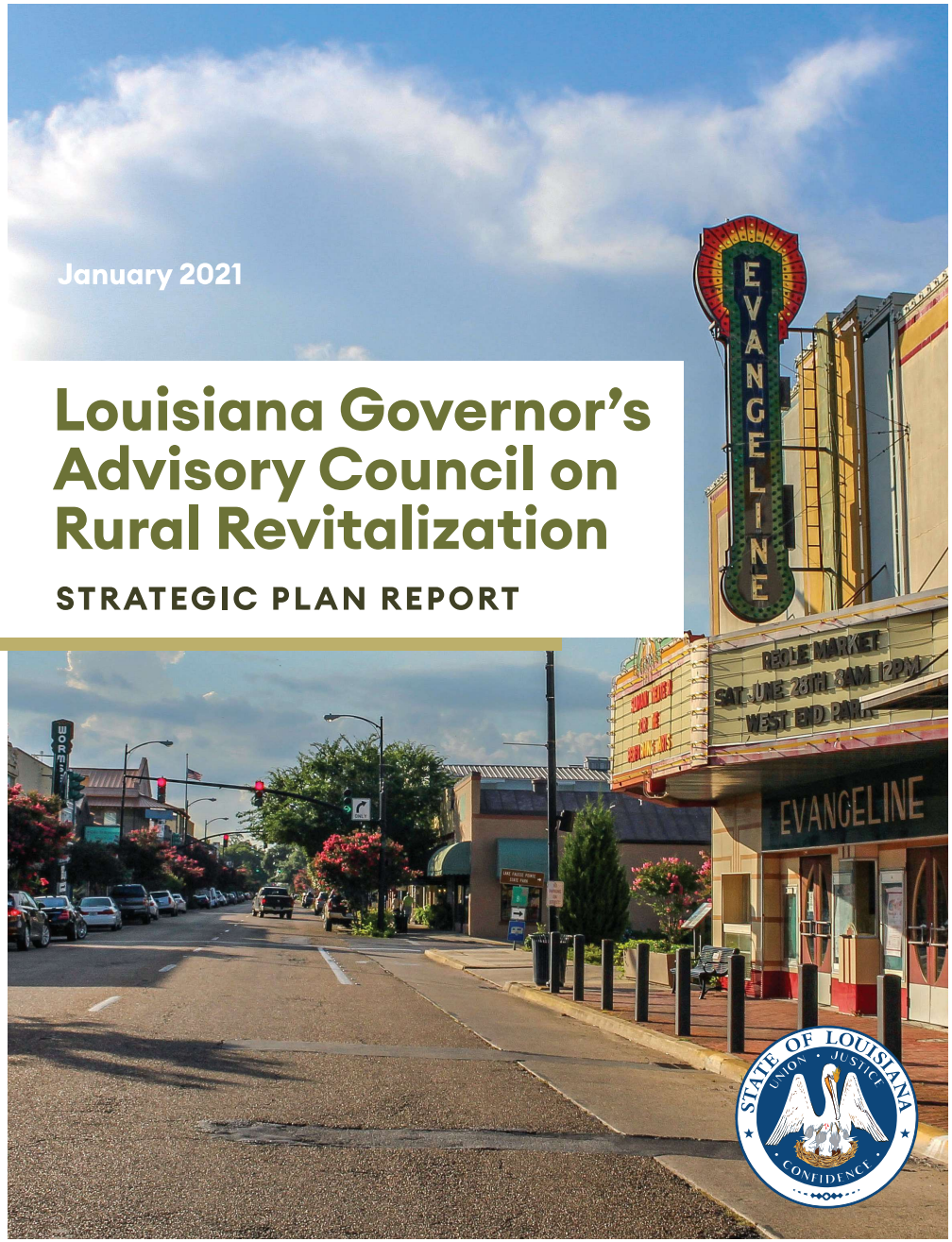

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Governor's Message

JOHN BEL EDWARDS

The Governor's Advisory Council on Rural Revitalization represents a multifaceted, multidisciplinary investment in the improvement of rural Louisiana. Across this state, once-thriving communities have seen generations of young people leave in search of economic opportunities. The intent of this council is to foster those opportunities closer to home. By building the systems necessary to sustain growth, this council will create new activity and opportunity in rural Louisiana.

The advisory council is comprised of 37 key state and local stakeholders appointed by the Governor. This council will be chaired by retired chief of staff and former Senator Ben Nevers. Membership includes designees of the president of the Senate, as well as the speaker of the House, the chairman of the Rural Caucus, and the chairman of the Black Caucus. Other members are drawn from state government, higher education, nonprofit leadership, and the private sector.

The duties of this council are to advise the Governor on issues of concern to the citizens of rural Louisiana. This council will maximize its efforts by discovering and harnessing state, federal, and private resources in bold new ways. The council will diligently work to identify practices from other states and bring those to Louisiana through executive or legislative efforts to best achieve the goal of rural revitalization. Additionally, the Council on Rural Revitalization will be responsible for identifying the needs and solutions in eight areas of focus: economic development, education, healthcare, infrastructure, clean water, agriculture and forestry, workforce development, and broadband. It is a comprehensive improvement to these key areas that will create lasting and sustainable growth.

"The rural communities are important to our state, and the people who make up those communities are important to us all."

The Council is required to develop and submit a comprehensive strategic plan to the Governor by January 15, 2021.

I. Executive Summary

Introduction

In February 2020, Louisiana Governor John Bel Edwards released an Executive Order (JBE 2020-3) establishing the Governor's Advisory Council on Rural Revitalization. The council was divided into nine subcommittees: Agriculture, Economic Development, Education, Finance, Healthcare, Infrastructure, Clean Water, Finance, Workforce Development, and Broadband. There was a total of 37 members across all subcommittees, appointed by the governor. The council's mission was to identify and advise the governor on the most prominent industry issues relative to rural Louisiana, and develop effective solutions based on best practice methods, stakeholder buy-in, and resource availability.

Document Purpose

This strategic plan is a comprehensive report of the council's research findings and recommendations. This document is to be presented to office of Governor John Bel Edwards and the general public for review.

The report provides the governor's office and the public with the following information:

- Background insight and data on rural Louisiana
- Objectives, mission, goals, and values of the council
- Strategic pillars specific to council's mission
- Priority goals and objectives of the council, as well as each subcommittee
- Stakeholder input

II. Context of Rural Louisiana

Statewide Louisiana Demographics

POPULATION

Total: 4,659,978 (25th in US)

Rural: 749,722 (24th in US)
Rural %: 16.1% (31st in US)

GENDER

48.8% Male

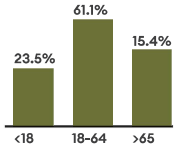
51.2% Female

NATIVE-BORN

95.1% Born in U.S.

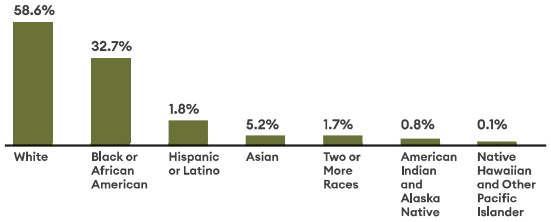
4.1% Foreign-born

NATIVE-BORN



DIVERSITY

Racial Percentage



EDUCATION

Aged 25+

84.8% Completed High School

23.7% Completed Bachelor's Degree

MINORITY-OWNED BUSINESS

2012

126,100 Minority-owned firms (30% of all firms)

BROADBAND ACCESS

89.3% Louisiana residents have access to 25mps download speed

72.8% Louisiana residents with a broadband internet subscription

Sources: BroadbandNow Louisiana Profile, US Census Louisiana, USDA ERS Louisiana Profile

Challenges of Rural Louisiana

Rural citizens have limited connectivity

About 494,000 people across rural Louisiana do not have access to an internet connection, limiting their ability to access telemedicine services and key public health information. Additionally, limited or unreliable internet access poses significant issues to education: 35 parishes reported that more than 50% of their students do not have home internet access while thirty-three parishes and city districts reported higher percentages.

The need for remote work and education has accelerated societal dependency on broadband for productivity and further exacerbates the rural-urban divide.

Rural communities have limited access to health care

The US News & World Report ranks Louisiana #27 in access to healthcare, yet #40 in healthcare quality. Additionally, in non-metro counties there are 6.6 nurse practitioners per 10,000 people. Rural communities do not have access consistently to preventative healthcare, instead relying on clinics which makes it a hassle to see the same provider on a regular basis.

As rural communities grapple with the implications of COVID-19, the Council has the opportunity to strategize ways to bolster healthcare access and quality.

Supply chains are disrupted

As economic activity pauses, player in increasingly fragmented ecosystems are forced to find alternate means of working due to the recessionary effects of the pandemic shutdown. These effects are especially felt in the Agriculture sector in which processors are not able to conduct business at full capacity, exacerbating food insecurity across the state and other segments of both meat and produce value chains.

Supporting agriculture would not only support the state's food security, but also spur activity across the supply chain and other industries to deliver macroeconomic impacts.

Unemployment has skyrocketed

As business close and people file jobless claims, the Louisiana Workforce Commission is working to meet extra demand. The Commission reports that more than $254M in state unemployment claims and over $37M in federal pandemic unemployment payments have been made since March 22. Additionally, Main Street America reports that a staggering 58% of Louisianans employed by small businesses may face unemployment.

Small businesses are suffering from the impact of COVID-19 due to closures and disrupted supply chains. The Council should consider strategies to support small business owners.

Sources: *US News & World Report, Rural Health Information Hub, Broadband Now, Farm Flavor, The Advocate, Main Street America, The Daily Advertiser*

III. Strategic Pillars

Council Subcommittee Topic Areas

The council is divided into nine subcommittees across different topic areas, all of which are interconnected and directly impact each other. This report is organized by the nine subcommittees of the council and can be read with the council strategic plan one-pager, which accompanies this report. Each subcommittee section identifies key issues and needs the governor's office should focus on addressing and proposed recommendations to help guide the governor's office for policy measures and program. Integration across subcommittees was a key component throughout the council's work.

BROADBAND

Expanding broadband in rural Louisiana can have immense benefits for the rest of the state, from improving economic opportunity and healthcare accessibility to enhancing agriculture and education. At present, broadband access is largely limited across many rural parts of the state.

CLEAN WATER

Louisiana's water infrastructure is aging and struggles to adequately meet the needs of its customers. Modernization of rural water systems can help streamline the operations of various, fragmented systems and can reduce the potential for public health disasters.

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Louisiana's economy is driven by small business infrastructure in urban and rural areas. Numerous programs exist to spur business investment, mitigate risk, and spark development in rural areas; however, these efforts could be enhanced through broadband adoption.

EDUCATION

Rural education is challenged by limited funding, which has made it difficult to recruit qualified teachers. Additionally, many rural students lack reliable or enhanced broadband connections at home, putting them at an even greater educational disadvantage compared to their urban peers.

FINANCE

Low rental housing supply and few credit options for lower-income, rural borrowers strain abilities to obtain adequate and affordable housing in rural Louisiana. Collaboration across public and private sectors attempts to address the problems, yet plenty of room exists for improvement.

HEALTHCARE

Rural healthcare faces unique challenges from limited health insurance, workforce retention, and accessibility barriers to health facilities. Broadband presents opportunities to help relieve some of these disparities through telehealth and virtual opportunities, increasingly important due to COVID-19.

INFRASTRUCTURE

Rural infrastructure faces deteriorating conditions, threatening quality of life and commercial prospects. While initiatives targeting the funding of infrastructure projects in rural areas exists, bringing down the aggregate costs of infrastructure through P3 partnerships and "smart" solutions could help.

WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

Workforce development disparities affect earning potential and may lead to skills mismatches. While several programs have been initiated to improve job training, opportunities to improve access to job trainings or apprenticeships can be explored further.

AGRICULTURE

As one of the state's top 3 productive sectors, agriculture contributes $11.7B to the Louisiana economy. However, an aging workforce and high reliance on certain commodities render the state's agricultural economy vulnerable to disruption. Technologies to modernize the industry can vastly improve agricultural efficiency.

Integration across subcommittees was a key component throughout the council's work

IV. Key Themes

Key Themes Essential to the Council's Recommendations

The advisory council consulted with governmental entities, rural communities, stakeholders, industry leaders, business, labor, technology companies, advocacy groups, and educational institutions. Input consisted of meetings open to the public, virtual events, online surveys, virtual consultations stakeholder meetings, and feedback from citizens of rural Louisiana.

Statewide and across all the subcommittee recommendations are four themes outlined below that are essential to policies or practices related to rural revitalizations.

The Council identified four key themes:

1. EXPAND BROADBAND ACCESS ACROSS THE STATE.

The policy recommendation made by every subcommittee of the Governor's Rural Revitalization Council (RRC) is to expand broadband access across the state. High-speed internet connectivity is a vital utility for the 21st century. The ability to access high-speed internet facilitates educational opportunities, economic endeavors, and improved healthcare outcomes. Increasing broadband access is cornerstone to the rural revitalization of Louisiana.

2. IMPROVE INFRASTRUCTURE.

Infrastructure as defined as: transportation, drainage and flood control, municipal wastewater collection and treatment touches every aspect of economic activity in the state. There exists a major need to continue to invest in Louisiana's aging transportation infrastructure of roads, bridges, ports, and rail. Additionally, there is a looming crisis of municipal wastewater collection system at risk of failing due to lack of expansion and maintenance. This issue is further complicated by the age and deteriorated condition of the state's rural drinking water infrastructure.

3. DEVELOPMENT AND EXPANSION OF WORKFORCE TRAINING AND HIGHER EDUCATION PROGRAMS ALIGNED WITH RURAL JOBS OPPORTUNITIES.

The state must increase the number of people in rural communities achieving credentials of value. There exists an unmet need for skilled workers in several fields in Louisiana's rural communities. Unmet needs include medical professionals of all levels and acutely licensed nurses, as well as certified water and wastewater system operators, and increasingly large numbers of high skilled tech-workers are needed to facilitate modern agricultural activities.

4. MAINTAIN AND EXPAND THE UNIVERSITY SYSTEM AGRICULTURAL CENTERS.

University agricultural centers and their extension offices provide much needed research and innovation for rural communities. The contained budget reductions suffered by agricultural centers in recent years have hampered their ability to perform the services and damaged rural communities.

V. Subcommittee Recommendations

This section contains each subcommittee's findings, goals, and objectives based on their sector or focus area.

BROADBAND

The RRC Broadband Subcommittee submits the following recommendations with three focus areas: access, adoption, and affordability.
(See the APPENDIX C for additional information.)

Access (Availability):
Goal 1: Develop and maintain a statewide broadband map.
Objectives:
- Identify served, unserved, and underserved areas as defined in the Broadband for Everyone in Louisiana State Plan. (See https://gov.louisiana.gov/page/Broadband-for-Louisiana.)
- An application has been submitted to the U.S. Economic Development Administration by DOTD and Louisiana Planning and Development Districts with the expectation of funding becoming available in February or March 2021. This funding will allow the LaPDDs to become a hub and collect the necessary data to create a map that will be housed in DOTD, as well as to hire a consultant to provide additional recommendations.

Goal 2: Assist providers with needed information and data to ensure more successful applications for federal grant funding.
Objectives:
- Identify barriers and encourage solutions by identifying incentives and promoting collaboration among all stakeholders.
- Identify and support the public-private partnership model, which has the ability to leverage grant dollars through local governments and nonprofits that private companies alone cannot.
- Reassess and modify The Local Government Fair Competition Act RS 45:844.41 to align with current and future needs of all rural communities.
- Update the current Broadband for Everyone in Louisiana State Plan to meet and exceed the telehealth needs for each community by setting the minimum committed download and upload speed tailored to the individual community healthcare needs.

Adoption:
Goal: Promote online use.
Objectives:
- COVID-19 has forced nearly every Louisianan, young and old, to participate in some way online where they were not before. Actively encourage efforts to promote online use for activities, including–but not limited to–economic development, healthcare, education and recreation.
- The cybersecurity department will focus on threats to ensure security as more users turn to online living, working, educating, and playing.

Affordability:
Goal: Increase access to affordable internet.
Objective:
- Identify or create federal and state programs to assist and/or subsidize low income families to be able to access available services for telehealth, education, e-commerce, and recreation. Affordable internet has been identified as a current and pre-COVID-19 barrier for low-income families to access existing internet services. The internet provides access to food, education, banking, telework, and a connection to friends and family–but only for those who can afford it. Telehealth needs are limited or nonexistent, children cannot participate in online classes, and following the recommended mitigation measures necessary to limit/reduce the spread of COVID-19 (such as avoiding a brick-and-mortar business or public place) is more difficult. The privilege to shop, bank, or conduct other business online is limited to only those who can afford it.

CLEAN WATER

Goal 1: Develop rural water mutual aid agreements for utilities and licensed specialists.

Objectives:

- The utilities providing water to various parishes of the state want to provide a method by which water utilities that have sustained physical damage from natural, man-made, or pandemic disaster could obtain emergency assistance in the form of qualified personnel, equipment, generators, tools, materials, and other equipment necessary to operate a water system.
- State and federal funding and regulatory agencies need to be involved with assisting utilities with different types of loans and grants. The Governors Rural Water Infrastructure Committee, Office of Community Development, Louisiana Department of Health (LDH) Drinking Water Revolving Loan Fund, U.S. Department of Agricultural-Rural Development funding programs, and others must meet on a regular basis to educate and direct these utilities to the right funding source.
- Develop and implement a program to assist smaller utilities in developing payment plans for customers after a storm or during a pandemic. Utilities could charge their customers a "rainy-day fee" of $1 to $2 per month. These funds could be used after a disaster natural, man-made, or pandemic to pay for customers' water bills. The monies could only be used after a disaster occurs.

Goal 2: Help utilities in Louisiana be more vigilant with precious resources, especially drinking water.

Objective:

- Assist water utilities with how to locate and repair water leaks by using updated leak-detection equipment. This will conserve water and lower their electrical consumption. (Louisiana has more than 1,300 water systems, with more rural water systems than urban utilities. In 2015, approximately 8,720 million gallons per day (Mgal/d) of water was withdrawn from groundwater and surface-water sources in Louisiana, a 2.6% increase from 2010. Total groundwater withdrawals were about 1,750 Mgal/d, an increase of 12% from 2010, and total surface-water withdrawals were 6,790 Mgal/d, an increase of 0.44% from 2010 to 2015.)

Goal 3: There is an immediate need to provide some type of local or state funding for utilities to upgrade their water systems.

Objective:

- Evaluate each water system statewide to detect needed upgrades, repairs, and/or infrastructure replacements. Some water utilities currently cannot efficiently operate and/or are not financially stable enough to connect to an adjoining utility. These water systems are constantly out of compliance with LDH regulatory standards and most frequently request funding for repairs. These same utilities cannot maintain certified water operators/specialists because they are incapable of paying an appropriate salary. The Louisiana Rural Water Association has an apprenticeship program that could assist with maintaining certified operators/specialists.

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Goal 1: Increase the awareness of existing programs that serve rural communities.

Objectives:

- Develop and deploy a robust communications plan. This plan must first recognize existing examples of successful rural revitalization through economic development.
- Parties interested in rural revitalization should work to identify key stakeholders and service providers amongst rural constituencies. Additionally, work is needed that offers information regarding economic development partners and resources.

Goal 2: Enhance small business support.

Objectives:

- Develop and fund systems that provide financial support to small business. These systems could include loan programs, gap funding, and seed capital. State projects should prioritize the use of Louisiana small businesses whenever economically feasible.
- State agencies need to more aggressively market small businesses.

Goal 3: Undertake a collaborative approach to community and economic development.

Objectives:

- Interested parties must identify public and private rural stakeholders engaged in economic development activities. There is a need to push for participation in the local community development Housing and Urban Development Action Plan for use of CDBG/HOME funds.
- Strengthen networks of support for local and regional programs.
- Build stronger alliances with economic development organizations. Such organizations can include chambers of commerce, planning and development districts, as well as federal agencies.

Goal 4: Increase the uptake of leadership training.

Objectives:

- Parties interested in rural revitalization must collaborate with key allies to develop leadership training modules that raise awareness around community and economic development.
- Increase the rate of completion of existing leadership training programs. These efforts can be accomplished by enhancing the capacity-building training for local government officials in cooperation with statewide stakeholders, including Louisiana Municipal Association (LMA), Louisiana Police Jury Association, and the Louisiana Housing Corporation. To identify gaps in community and economic development training programs, conduct an assessment of available programs. Work with statewide stakeholders to fill any gaps.

Goal 5: Decrease housing blight.

Objectives:

- Identify agencies currently engaged in blight-reduction efforts. These agencies must be bolstered though the shared alignment of best practice policy.
- Raise awareness of the pervasiveness of this issue.
- Parties interested in rural revitalization must continue to engage in policy development and legislative remedies. Statewide stakeholders currently working on this issue include the LMA, The Main Street Program, and the Office of the Lieutenant Governor.

Goal 6: Increase support for and participation in Louisiana's Main Street Program.

Objectives:

- Support increased funding for the Main Street Program.
- Increase interagency collaboration between the Office of Culture, Recreation and Tourism, Louisiana Economic Development, and the Department of Transportation and Development.
- Create grants to support the arts and cultural institutions. These grants could help community leaders develop a unique and vibrant atmosphere within their communities.

Goal 5: Stakeholders must promote small businesses, especially in rural communities.

Small businesses are vitally important to local economies by bringing both growth and innovation.

Objectives:

- Create a rural small business-focused department to increase the footprint of revitalization within the community.

- Coordinate with local, state, and federal partners to educate rural communities and businesses on various business incentives, including potential tax reductions, worker supportive services, worker training, and recruitment.

EDUCATION

Goal 1: Extend broadband access to every community in Louisiana.

Access to high-speed cost-effective internet service is a necessity, rather than a luxury–it allows all citizens to participate in the economy, access government services, seek health care services, maximize educational opportunities, and acquire education and workforce training opportunities.

Objectives:

- Develop a mapping of internet access that identifies those communities that lack access or have limited/low-bandwidth access because of a lack of infrastructure, lack of funding to access the service, or lack of knowledge of the service.
- Develop a long-term strategy for extending service to underserved communities in conjunction with private providers and state and federal entities.
- Provide affordable high-speed internet plans for families and students in conjunction with private providers and state and federal entities.
- Establish long-term goals for extending access to rural communities.

Goal 2: Support research in rural communities.

Objectives:

- Leverage the combined resources of the state to support and advocate for critical health, economic, social, and applied research aimed at supporting communities, citizens, and stakeholders affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond. (See APPENDIX C for more information on this research.)
- Invest in the research stations that are the vehicles through which this research is conducted.
- Develop sustainable funding models that fund ongoing research efforts.
- Measure and monitor the amount of federal and privately funded research conducted in Louisiana annually.
- The agricultural center should consider jointly sponsoring a return-on-investment (ROI) study that seeks to document the full impact of an investment in research.

Goal 3: Sustain K-12 education in rural communities.

The future of any community is in large part a function of the viability of its educational system. Unfortunately, many of Louisiana's rural school districts are struggling financially and in delivering the optimal level of education.

Objectives:

- Develop a method to identify rural school systems in financial distress and deliver technical assistance to ensure educational services are maintained along with providing opportunities to strengthen the quality of services.
- Consider making funding policy changes that recognize the extraordinary funding challenges that exist in the rural communities.
- Develop a model to facilitate opportunities for rural school systems to participate in cooperative services arrangements to share expenses and achieve operational efficiencies in the delivery of educational services.
- Consider providing specific funding to support the transition from traditional operating structures to this new model and rewards for achieving greater efficiencies.
- Identify curricular gaps (such as entrepreneurship, business operations, etc.) that may exist in today's education system and implement programming that seeks to prepare young people for the economy of rural communities during their high school years.
- Provide greater opportunities for participation in the many club and organization experiences that promote rural job opportunities (FFA, 4-H, etc.) and develop a framework for minimizing the challenges that often hinder student engagement in these activities.
- Implement the Carl Perkins State Plan in a manner that leverages the secondary and postsecondary funding to maximize career and technical education opportunities for students at all levels. Specifically, deliver career and technical education through dual enrollment courses that are focused on completion of high-demand credentials.
- Develop a leadership roundtable that brings together leaders who have successfully led school districts in rural communities who may be able to mentor current and upcoming leaders.

Goal 4: Expand the offerings of relevant workforce training and higher education opportunities.

Just as rural communities are inextricably linked to the success of the K-12 schools, they must have access to quality workforce and higher education programming that helps people establish themselves in careers that are family sustaining. The higher education master plan formally adopted by the Board of Regents last year clearly outlines a goal of increasing the education level of our people. Louisiana has a robust and diverse higher education system that has fully bought into the goals of that plan. However, the state simply cannot accomplish that goal without significant increases in the number of people in rural communities starting and finishing credentials of value.

Objectives:

- Maintain access to postsecondary education in rural communities by sustaining rural campuses and expanding access to programming.
- Produce data reports showing educational participation and attainment by parish to highlight the need to focus recruitment and completion efforts in rural communities.
- Develop a statewide effort to expand offerings of certificate and degree programs at rural campuses using electronic and hybrid delivery technology.
- Establish the rural campuses and research centers as internet access hubs for rural communities to ensure access.
- Put in place a sustainability and viability plan in place for rural higher education assets, such as the campuses of two-year colleges and the agricultural centers' research centers and extension operations, as they are essential to the long-term health of rural communities.
- Consider changing making funding policy changes that recognize the extraordinary needs that exist in the rural communities and reward colleges for improving participation and completion in these communities.
- Significantly increase the amount of state need-based financial aid that will help reduce cost as a barrier to attending postsecondary education. (See APPENDIX C for more information on education ROIs.)
- Support short-term workforce training in high-demand occupations, such as the governor's recent pledge of $10 million in discretionary education funds from the CARES Act to reskill at least 16,000 individuals in fiscal year 2021 based on regional jobs available in the short and intermediate term. Ensure the needs and jobs in rural communities are incorporated in such training programs.
- Develop and implement a comprehensive education and training program that involves crucial groups (Louisiana Department of Public Safety & Corrections, Louisiana Department of Juvenile Justice, representatives of the Louisiana Sheriff's Association, Louisiana Department of Education, Louisiana Board of Regents, and the Louisiana Community and Technical College System) and provides the opportunity for every single incarcerated individual to earn a credential prior to exiting the justice system. The current system is woefully underfunded and difficult to navigate.
- Enhance collaboration between school districts, higher education, and workforce development boards at the local level to leverage all assets and funding streams to advance the shared mission of upskilling and educating rural Louisianans.

Goal 5: Rural revitalization for future health education. The quality and viability of rural health care is largely a function of the availability of the rural health care workforce at every level. From entry-level environmental technicians to advance degreed specialists, we must develop a targeted plan to develop our own workforce. (See APPENDIX C for more information on plans to develop health education.)

Objectives:

- In clinical areas, Louisiana could benefit from greater flexibility that would allow for the delivery of programs electronically with hands-on or clinical experiences taking place locally. As an example, the current shortage of registered nurses (RNs) could be addressed at least in part by improving the LPN-to-RN programs and delivering them via electronic delivery to rural communities. Additionally, approval of education and training providers should no longer be limited by site. Programs should have the flexibility to move around a region of the state to meet the needs as they emerge.
- The state should consider developing a rural health education network that leverages the broader resources of all of its public education and training providers to help meet the most pressing health care workforce challenges. Similar efforts in some states, such as Arkansas, have helped alleviate the health care workforce challenge.

Goal 6: Seek innovative ways to expand access to high-quality affordable childcare. While access to high-quality early childhood programs is a well-documented challenge across our state, families in rural areas face the greatest obstacles. Parents in rural parishes are more likely to rely on their own family members rather than a childcare center or pre-kindergarten program. (See APPENDIX C for information on "childcare deserts.")

Objectives:

- The state should take steps to implement the recommendations of the Early Childhood Commission to make a bold investment of $85.8 million to create "LA B to 3," and an increase of nearly that amount annually over the next decade to provide funding to expand quality seats for children ages birth to three in childcare settings (LA B-3 Executive Summary, 2019).
- The Early Childhood Commission should compile and analyze data specific to challenges facing rural communities in order to develop targeted recommendations. This may include strategies to increase access to and the quality of family childcare or other home-based providers, which are more common in rural areas.
- The federal government should increase funding for the Child Care and Development Block Grant to increase access to and quality of childcare in rural areas.
- The Department of Education should utilize results from the 2020 Market Rate Survey to consider increasing the subsidy rate.
- The Department of Education should empower Ready Start Networks in rural regions of the state to raise revenue locally to address persistent gaps in access to high-quality childcare at the local level.

Sources: Louisiana Early Childhood Education Commission; Louisiana Policy Institute for Children; Center for American Progress; Urban Institute.

FINANCE

Although the realm of finance has been sidetracked by all matters related to COVID-19, municipal debt is an issue that could present dire consequences for Louisiana's rural communities. Construction projects, water and sewer projects, schools, and nearly every other project will be saddled with debt that must be restructured. (See the APPENDIX C for more information.)

Goal: Seriously investigate the debt facing Louisiana rural municipalities.

Objectives:

- Propose legislation at the state and federal levels that would allow municipalities to restructure debt.
- Work with Gov. Edwards to create an infrastructure bank proposal that would be geared toward roads and clean water initiatives.

HEALTHCARE

Goal 1: Provide universal broadband access throughout all of Louisiana. It is essential for telehealth and tele-education. With universal broadband services, the healthcare well-being of rural citizens will greatly improve.

Goal 2: Preserve rural hospitals and healthcare delivery systems. Without local, reliable healthcare systems, there would not be substantial educational systems, in addition to, economic development.

Objective:

- The Rural Hospital Preservation Act must be maintained at all costs. The Rural Hospital Preservation Act, which was made into law by the State Legislature, is exemplary of how laws can be passed to protect rural communities. The core of this act mandates that the state legislature and state government must provide financial and legislative support for rural hospitals throughout the state.

Goal 3: Healthcare providers should be incentivized to choose rural areas to practice their profession. That includes not only physicians, but also allied health providers, nursing professionals, pharmacists, and dental science graduates.

Objective:

- Explore the various ways and means of accomplishing these incentives are available within the legislative and executive branch functions.

Goal 4: Enhance healthcare literacy for our population in an interprofessional manner.

Objective:

- Employ media-based or community-based educational presentations of rural hospitals, federally qualified health centers, university and community hospitals, or LSU Agriculture Center (e.g., 4-H Clubs) systems. Without uniformity of healthcare literacy throughout Louisiana's citizenry, our healthcare outcomes will always lag behind national standards.

Goal 5: Expand telehealth services and eliminate obstacles (e.g., desire to receive care, lack of anonymity when seeking care, shortage of mental health professionals, transportation to and from healthcare facilities) to behavioral health services. Rural patients especially face unique challenges when attempting to receive effective treatment for mental illness and mental health conditions. Telehealth services would give residents of rural communities the access they need to healthcare services, as the need for mental health services is often emergent.

Objectives:

- Improve internet service in rural areas.
- Provide telehealth services in conjunction with primary care services to provide a continuity that is often missing between primary care and mental health professionals.
- Enhance reimbursements for telehealth services to encourage providers to participate in providing these services to rural communities.

Goal 6: Prioritize Act 805.

Objective:

- Legislators passed the act in 2008 to help establish a loan-repayment program to recruit physicians to rural communities. This act has never been funded. In conjunction with the Rural Hospital Coalition and the governor's office, funds for this incentive program have been approved. The act provides 40 physician loan-replacement scholarships per year for at least five years, as well as needed primary care physicians to rural hospitals.

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- Work with Gov. Edwards to create an infrastructure bank proposal that would be geared toward roads and clean water initiatives.

HEALTHCARE

Goal 1: Provide universal broadband access throughout all of Louisiana. It is essential for telehealth and tele-education. With universal broadband services, the healthcare well-being of rural citizens will greatly improve.

Goal 2: Preserve rural hospitals and healthcare delivery systems. Without local, reliable healthcare systems, there would not be substantial educational systems, in addition to, economic development.

Objective:

- The Rural Hospital Preservation Act must be maintained at all costs. The Rural Hospital Preservation Act, which was made into law by the State Legislature, is exemplary of how laws can be passed to protect rural communities. The core of this act mandates that the state legislature and state government must provide financial and legislative support for rural hospitals throughout the state.

Goal 3: Healthcare providers should be incentivized to choose rural areas to practice their profession. That includes not only physicians, but also allied health providers, nursing professionals, pharmacists, and dental science graduates.

Objective:

- Explore the various ways and means of accomplishing these incentives are available within the legislative and executive branch functions.

Goal 4: Enhance healthcare literacy for our population in an interprofessional manner.

Objective:

- Employ media-based or community-based educational presentations of rural hospitals, federally qualified health centers, university and community hospitals, or LSU Agriculture Center (e.g., 4-H Clubs) systems. Without uniformity of healthcare literacy throughout Louisiana's citizenry, our healthcare outcomes will always lag behind national standards.

Goal 5: Expand telehealth services and eliminate obstacles (e.g., desire to receive care, lack of anonymity when seeking care, shortage of mental health professionals, transportation to and from healthcare facilities) to behavioral health services. Rural patients especially face unique challenges when attempting to receive effective treatment for mental illness and mental health conditions. Telehealth services would give residents of rural communities the access they need to healthcare services, as the need for mental health services is often emergent.

Objectives:

- Improve internet service in rural areas.
- Provide telehealth services in conjunction with primary care services to provide a continuity that is often missing between primary care and mental health professionals.
- Enhance reimbursements for telehealth services to encourage providers to participate in providing these services to rural communities.

Goal 6: Prioritize Act 805.

Objective:

- Legislators passed the act in 2008 to help establish a loan-repayment program to recruit physicians to rural communities. This act has never been funded. In conjunction with the Rural Hospital Coalition and the governor's office, funds for this incentive program have been approved. The act provides 40 physician loan-replacement scholarships per year for at least five years, as well as needed primary care physicians to rural hospitals.

INFRASTRUCTURE

Infrastructure includes transportation, drainage and flood control, and municipal wastewater collection and treatment. The mission of the Infrastructure Subcommittee is to sustain and improve infrastructure in rural areas as a foundation for economic growth and enhanced quality of life. (See the APPENDIX C for more information.)

Goal 1: Strengthen and sustain transportation infrastructure and services in rural areas.
The Louisiana Statewide Transportation Plan contains numerous recommendations for achieving this goal.
Objectives:

- Increase funding for state highway pavement preservation by January 2022 to facilitate commerce and personal travel.
- Establish a state-funded program by January 2022 to assist local governments with the rehabilitation of parish-owned and municipal-owned roads to facilitate commerce and personal travel.
- Increase funding for state-owned bridge preservation by January 2022 to facilitate commerce and personal travel.
- Increase funding for parish-owned and municipal-owned bridge preservation by January 2022 to facilitate commerce and personal travel.
- Increase funding for highway safety programs by January 2022 to improve the safety of rural travel.
- Increase funding for the Port Priority Program, particularly for projects that improve the efficiency of transport of agricultural, forest, and other rural products, by January 2022.
- Support the establishment of a state-funded rail retention and infrastructure program by January 2022 to help maintain the viability of short-line railroads in rural areas.
- Upgrade general aviation airport infrastructure to meet minimum standards to support business, medical, and personal needs in rural areas by July 2026.
- Provide state funding for a portion of rural transit annual operating expenses by January 2022 to meet current needs and future expansion as Louisiana society continues to age.

Goal 2: Reduce flooding and flood damage in rural areas.
Objectives:

- Continue the ongoing development and implementation of the Louisiana Watershed Initiative (LWI).
- Use the LWI hydrologic and hydraulic models to evaluate impacts and determine the risk profile associated with residential, commercial, and industrial real estate development, and to evaluate potential flood control projects to determine upstream and downstream impacts immediately upon model completion.

- Promote actions, including legislative, administrative, and regulatory, where appropriate, to enhance watershed and floodplain management in Louisiana.
- Continue to support the LWI Regional Capacity Building Grant Program's goal in supporting strong and effective governance for the eight provisional watershed regions and the establishment of regional commissions with authority to implement LWI plans and recommendations. Enact legislation establishing governance by July 2022.
- Work with local governments to enact ordinances and policies that restrict development in flood-prone areas by July 2026.
- Sustain the Flood Control Program administered by DOTD at the current level of funding.

Goal 3: Repair/rehabilitate municipal wastewater collection and treatment systems serving rural communities.
Objectives:

- Develop an inventory of municipal wastewater collection and treatment systems by July 2022.
- Assess the condition of the systems and estimate repair/rehabilitation costs by July 2024.
- For each system, determine whether it can be self-sustaining following repair/rehabilitation, including consolidation with other systems by July 2025.
- Identify alternatives to the repair/rehabilitation of existing systems by July 2025.
- Establish a funding program to repair/rehabilitate those systems that can be self-sustaining or to pursue alternatives to repair/rehabilitation for those that cannot be self-sustaining by July 2026.

WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

Goal 1: Educate rural communities about the various workforce development programs available statewide through government, private, nonprofit programs, and partnerships.

Objectives:

- Create a web-based portal that houses all information about workforce development programs. The scope of programs listed should include apprenticeships, customize training programs, incumbent working training, on-the-job training, internships or work experience.
- Prioritize workforce development programs that are focused on maximizing employment, retention, and increasing credential attainment.

Goal 2: Rural revitalization-interested parties should provide or facilitate the delivery of supportive services to assist with meeting workforce challenges and needs.

Services, such as transportation, childcare, dependent care, housing, and needs-related payments, are necessary to enable an individual to participate in work-related activities.

Goal 3: Increase awareness of workforce needs and available opportunities in rural communities.

Objective:

- Create regional-specific promotional campaigns. Targets could include rural high schools, chambers of commerce, nonprofits, and religious organizations. Examples of workforce needs in rural Louisiana include, but are not limited to, certified nursing professionals, and certified water or wastewater operators. Targeted marketing campaigns could drive up recruitment to meet this unfulfilled need.

Goal 4: Create innovative service delivery strategies such as broadband access and distance.

Objective:

- Partner with local broadband providers and public Wi-Fi entities (e.g., local libraries) to ensure that internet access is available for virtual learning and training opportunities.

Goal 5: Stakeholders must promote small businesses, especially in rural communities.

Small businesses are vitally important to local economies by bringing both growth and innovation.

Objectives:

- Create a rural small business-focused department to increase the footprint of revitalization within the community.
- Coordinate with local, state, and federal partners to educate rural communities and businesses on various business incentives, including potential tax reductions, worker supportive services, worker training, and recruitment.

VI. Stakeholder Engagement and Public Feedback

Survey Overview

The Rural Revitalization Survey Report was created and used to better identify, understand, and compare needs of parish's across rural Louisiana. The council created questions for their respective subcommittees and asked participants to identify which problems were most important to them. Results from the survey were used to develop better strategies for those from rural communities that will, ultimately, be impacted by the Council's decisions. It is also imperative to this council's mission to gain comprehensive understanding of local communities to help better shape decisions and recommendations. Engagement across all industries was gathered (e.g., government, telecom, agriculture, business, health care, education, veterans' affairs).

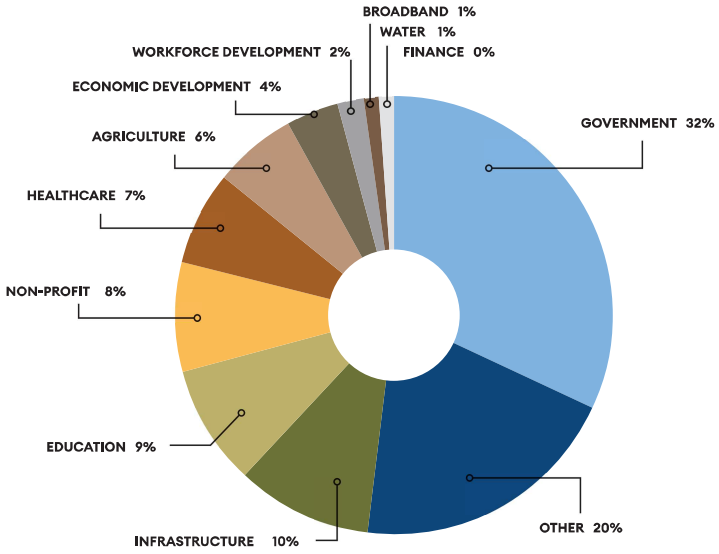
(See Error! Reference source not found for full survey report data).

THE COUNCIL ENGAGED RURAL COMMUNITIES IN CONVERSATIONS THROUGHOUT THE STATE TO ALLOW OPPORTUNITIES TO PROVIDE FEEDBACK AND GUIDE FUTURE POLICY.

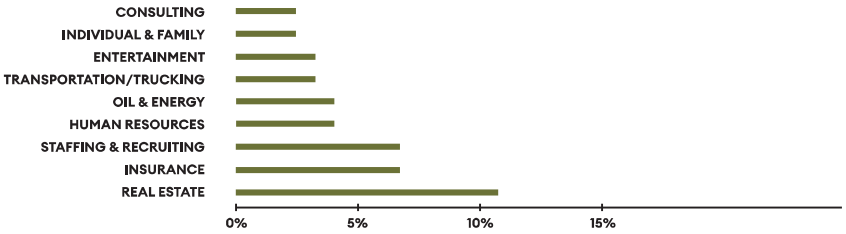
RESPONDENTS BY INDUSTRY

- The Infrastructure, Healthcare, and Education subcommittees had the largest number of participants among the council.
- Most of the respondents were from the government sector or fell into our "other" categories.

Total Respondents by Industry

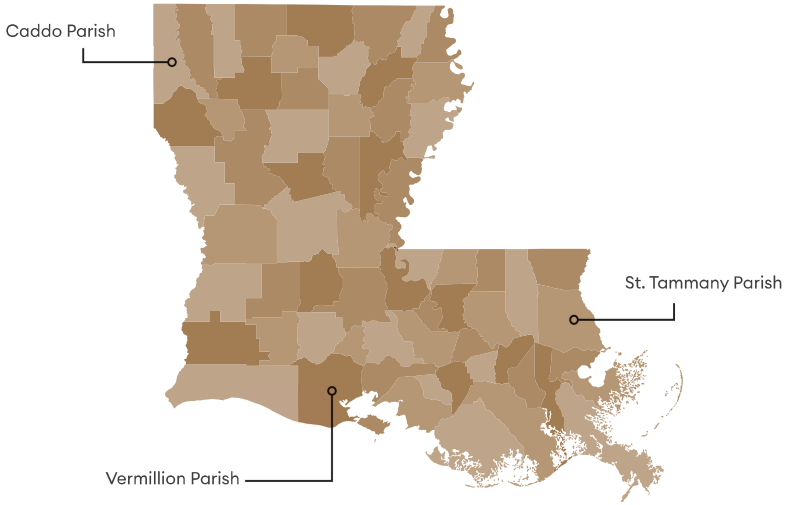


Other Industries



RESPONDENTS BY PARISH

- Responses were from over 60 parishes across Louisiana.
- The highest rate of participation was from Vermilion parish with 32 respondents, followed by Caddo with 26 and St. Tammany with 21.
- 83% of respondents work in the same parish they reside



MORE THAN 300 INDIVIDUALS FILLED OUT THE SURVEY AS PART OF THE COUNCIL'S ENGAGEMENT EFFORTS

Appendix A – Ongoing Efforts

RURAL LOUISIANA ON TRACK FOR $1.8 BILLION IN NEW INVESTMENTS

- The Rural Revitalization Council has worked to secure loan forgiveness for new physicians who operate in rural communities. This scholarship program will pay down some student debt for five graduating medical students per year increasing access to healthcare in rural communities.
- Louisiana Green Fuels, to develop a renewable diesel plant in Caldwell Parish using wood waste as the feedstock. The company is completing final feasibility analysis for the project and expects a final investment decision to provide more than $700 million for the project and create 76 new direct jobs.
- Effective on October 28, 2020, House Bill 69 of the 2020 2nd Extraordinary Session became Act 23 with the signature of Governor Edwards creating the Louisiana Agricultural Workforce Development Program. This program works to incentivize the creation of internships and employment by agricultural businesses in the state.
- On February 18, 2021, the Louisiana Agricultural Finance Authority met and approved moving forward with a loan of $2.4 million to the South Louisiana Rail Facility, LLC for construction of a rice mill in Jefferson Davis Parish. This is in addition to $1.6 million in funding from Louisiana Economic Development
- The governor's office has hired the state's first ever Executive Director for Broadband Development & Connectivity to serve as the lead coordinator for the state's efforts to addressing the challenges around broadband accessibility and affordability
- On November 6, 2020, Gov. John Bel Edwards and CEO Evon Roquemore of Brightside Clinic and Everso Systems announced that mental health clinic Brightside and behavioral health software-development firm Everso will create a combined 20 new direct jobs at their respective facilities in Bogalusa and Denham Springs, Louisiana.
- On November 17, 2020, a widening project was announced in Calcasieu Parish to widen 10.5 miles of I-10 to six lanes from the Texas state line to east of LA 108, replace and widen 10 bridges, and replace the eastbound weigh-in-motion system.
- On January 21, 2021, Gov. John Bel Edwards and International Paper Bogalusa Mill announced the company plans to invest up to $52.2 million in capital to increase the efficiency of the mill, which has been a manufacturing mainstay of Washington Parish for more than a century.
- A new specialty chemicals company, Avant Organics LLC, plans to manufacture innovative products at the Central Louisiana Regional Port in Alexandria, subject to a final lease agreement. Parent company Crest Industries will make a $4 million capital investment and create 40 new direct jobs through the project.

- ElementUS announced an $800 Million Rare Earth Elements Project with a new joint venture to convert residual bauxite from Noranda at a site in St. James Parish.
- Arq Fuel announced an investment of $40 million for a fuel manufacturing facility in St. Charles Parish, providing a cleaner and more valuable blending component for oil products entering the power-generation and marine industries.
- Louisiana will be home to a $100 million Amazon fulfillment center in Carencro (Lafayette Parish) which will employ 500 and should be open in early 2022.
- Gulf Island will expand their shipyard workforce adding 106 new direct jobs in their Houma location. (Terrebonne Parish)
- Medline announced a $53 million project in Hammond, which will result in over 1,000 new direct and indirect jobs at their distribution center. (Tangipahoa Parish)
- CF Industries will invest $41.4 million at their Donaldsonville Nitrogen Complex, retaining 487 jobs and resulting in more than 30 new jobs. (Ascension Parish)

RURAL REVITALIZATION COUNCIL

This administration has worked towards rural revitalization in the areas identified by the RRC report by:

Agriculture: Increasing in-state capacity to process raw agricultural products increasing their value.

Healthcare: Expanding Medicaid in Louisiana instantly granting 400,000 citizens access to healthcare resulting in zero rural hospitals closing in the past five years.

Education: Increasing funding for k-12 schools for the first time in a generation. Working to increase fairness in teacher pay.

Economic Development: Creating Louisiana Rural Evolution, a new approach to rural economic development.

Infrastructure: Implementing the Rural Grant Opportunity Program - Statewide Flood Control Program. This program provides eligible rural communities with up to %100 reimbursement of the cost of construction for flood control projects.

Clean Water: Creating the governor's Rural Water Infrastructure Committee to improve the states aged drinking water systems by increasing interagency cooperation. The RWIC has overseen the injection of millions of dollars into Louisiana's water systems.

Broadband: Creating the Broadband for Everyone in Louisiana Commission to facilitate private sector providers, public entities, and other broadband stakeholders to: Improve both the adoption and availability of broadband service for Louisiana residents. Hired the state's first ever Executive Director for Broadband Development & Connectivity

Workforce Development: Working through Louisiana Workforce Commission to increase the rural labor participation rate.

Finance and Housing: Deploying disaster related Community Development Block Grant funding in tandem with other federal dollars to create new housing in rural Louisiana.

Appendix B – Executive Order

State of Louisiana

EXECUTIVE DEPARTMENT

EXECUTIVE ORDER NUMBER JBE 2020 – 3

GOVERNOR'S ADVISORY COUNCIL ON RURAL REVITALIZATION

WHEREAS, rural areas of the State of Louisiana, as is the case across the country, are in crisis and bear a disproportionate burden of poverty, lack of access to healthcare, and poor quality of life;

WHEREAS, many areas of rural Louisiana lack basic services such as education, healthcare, infrastructure, clean water, and dwindling resources;

WHEREAS, agricultural production is critical to rural economies, rural revitalization goes far beyond agriculture as it includes the development of non-farm opportunities and it makes cutting-edge technology and innovation the key of rural economic growth;

WHEREAS, the State of Louisiana will strive to remove any barriers that may prohibit individuals in rural Louisiana from living a full, healthy, and prosperous life; and

WHEREAS, it is in the best interests of the citizens of the State of Louisiana to engage in a centralized and coordinated effort to further revitalization of rural Louisiana to be more productive, sustainable, healthy, attractive places to live.

NOW THEREFORE, I, JOHN BEL EDWARDS, Governor of the State of Louisiana, by virtue of the authority vested by the Constitution and laws of the State of Louisiana, do hereby order and direct as follows:

SECTION 1: The Governor's Advisory Council on Rural Revitalization (hereafter "Council") is established and created within the Office of the Governor.

SECTION 2: The duties of the Council shall include, but are not limited to, the following:

A. Advising the Governor on issues of concern to the citizens of rural Louisiana;

B. Identifying the needs, issues, and solutions relative to rural revitalization, including economic development, education, healthcare, infrastructure, clean water, agriculture, aquaculture & forestry, workforce development, and broadband;

C. Identifying state, federal, and private resources available to facilitate rural revitalization efforts; and

D. Identifying best practices from other states and recommend legislation to accomplish the solutions proposed by the Council.

SECTION 3: On or before January 5, 2021, the Council shall develop and submit a comprehensive strategic plan to the Governor regarding the issues set forth in Section 2 of this Order and shall submit annual progress reports thereafter.

SECTION 4: The Council shall be composed of a maximum of thirty-seven (37) members who, unless otherwise specified, shall be appointed by and serve at the pleasure of the Governor and shall include, but not limited to, the following:

1. The Speaker of the House, or his designee;
2. The President of the Senate, or his designee;
3. A Louisiana congressman whose congressional district is primarily rural, or his designee;
4. The Lieutenant Governor, or his designee;
5. The Commissioner of Agriculture and Forestry, or his designee;
6. The President of the Louisiana Community and Technical College System, or his designee;
7. The State Executive Director of the Louisiana Farm Service Agency State Office of the United States Department of Agriculture, or his designee;
8. The Secretary of Louisiana Economic Development;
9. The Secretary of Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries;
10. The Secretary of the Louisiana Department of Transportation and Development;
11. The Secretary of Louisiana Workforce Commission;
12. The Chair of the Louisiana Legislative Rural Caucus, or his designee;
13. The Chair of the Louisiana Legislative Black Caucus, or his designee;
14. The Chancellor-Dean of Southern University Agricultural Research and Extension Center, or his designee;
15. Assistant Dean of Rural Health Initiatives Louisiana State University Health Science Center Shreveport, or his designee;
16. The Dean of the Edward Via College of Osteopathic Medicine, or the director's designee;
17. The Dean of the Louisiana State University Health Science Center School of Dentistry, or his designee;
18. The Executive Director of the Police Jury Association, or his designee;
19. The Executive Director of the Louisiana Municipal Association, or his designee;
20. The Executive Director of the Louisiana Sheriffs Association, or his designee;
21. The Chief Executive Officer of the Louisiana Electric Cooperatives, Inc., or his designee;
22. The chair of the Louisiana Rural Hospital Coalition, or his designee;
23. The president of the Louisiana Farm Bureau Federation, or his designee;
24. The chair of the Louisiana Black Farmers Association, or his designee;
25. The Executive Director of the Office of Community Development, Division of Administration;
26. The Executive Director of the Louisiana Housing Corporation;
27. The chair of the Broadband for Everyone in Louisiana Commission;
28. The chair of the Cybersecurity Taskforce;
29. The chair of the Rural Water Association, or his designee;

30. The Dean of the Louisiana State University College of Agriculture, or his designee;

31. One (1) representative of the telemedicine initiative;

32. One (1) member of the Louisiana Bankers Association; and

33. Five (5) members with qualifications deemed appropriate by the Governor, which shall include being a citizen of a rural Louisiana community with an interest in local housing, cybersecurity and infrastructure expansion, and reducing crime.

SECTION 5: The chair of the Council shall be appointed by the Governor from the membership of the Council. All other officers, if any, shall be elected by and from the membership of the Council.

SECTION 6: The Council shall meet at regularly scheduled intervals and at the call of the chair. Additionally, the Chair shall convene meetings of the Council at various geographic locations around the State.

SECTION 7: At its first meeting, the Council shall establish working groups of Council members based on subject matter jurisdiction.

SECTION 8: Council members shall not receive additional compensation or a per diem from the Office of the Governor for serving on the Council.

Council members who are an employee or an elected public official of the state of Louisiana or a political subdivision of the state of Louisiana may seek reimbursement of travel expenses, in accordance with PPM 49, from their employing and/or elected department, agency and/or office.

Council members who are also a member of the Louisiana Legislature may seek a per diem from the Louisiana State Senate or House of Representatives, as appropriate, for their attendance.

SECTION 9: Support staff, facilities, and resources for the Council shall be provided by the Office of the Governor.

SECTION 10: All departments, commissions, boards, offices, entities, agencies, and officers of the state of Louisiana, or any political subdivision thereof, are authorized and directed to cooperate with the Council in implementing the provisions of this Order.

SECTION 11: This Order is effective upon signature and shall continue in effect until amended, modified, terminated, or rescinded by the Governor, or terminated by operation of law.

IN WITNESS WHEREOF, I have set my hand officially and caused to be affixed the Great Seal of the State of Louisiana in the City of Baton Rouge, on this 14th day of February, 2020.

GOVERNOR OF LOUISIANA

ATTEST BY THE
SECRETARY OF STATE

SECRETARY OF STATE

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Appendix C – Advisory Council Membership

The Speaker of the House, *or designee*	**Charlie Martin**
The President of the Senate, *or designee*	**Fred Mills**
A Louisiana Congressional representative whose congressional district is primarily rural, *or designee*	**Julia Letlow**
Lieutenant Governor *Designee*	**Michael Ince**
The Commissioner of Agriculture and Forestry, *or designee*	**Mike Strain**
The President of the Louisiana Community and Technical College System, *or designee*	**Monty Sullivan**
The State Executive Director of the Louisiana Farm Service Agency State Office of the United States Department of Agriculture, *or designee*	**Roy Holleman**
The Secretary of Louisiana Economic Development *Designee*	**Pat Witty**
The Secretary of Wildlife and Fisheries	**Jack Montoucet**
The Secretary of the Department of Transportation and Development	**Shawn Wilson**
Secretary, Louisiana Workforce Commission *Desginee*	**Kenneth Burnell**
The Chair of the Louisiana Legislative Rural Caucus, *or designee*	**Chris Turner**
The Chair of the Louisiana Black Caucus *Designee*	**Katrina Jackson**
The Chancellor or Dean of Southern University Agricultural Research an Extension Center, *or designee*	**Orlando Means**
Assistant Dean of Rural Health Initiatives Louisiana State University Health Science Center Shreveport, *or designee*	**Lester Wayne Johnson, MD**
The Dean of the Edward Via College of Osteopathic Medicine, *or designee*	**Ray Morrison, DO, FACOS**
The Dean of the Louisiana State University Health Science Center School of Dentistry, *or designee*	**Robert Laughlin**
The Executive Director of the Police Jury Association, *or designee*	**Major Thibaut**
The Executive Director of the Louisiana Municipal Association, *or designee*	**John Gallagher**
The Executive Director of the Louisiana Sheriff's Association, *or designee*	**Michael Rantza**
The Chief Executive Officer of the Louisiana Electric Cooperative, Inc., *or designee*	**Jeff Arnold**
The chair of the Louisiana Rural Hospital Coalition, *or designee*	**Randy Morris**
The President of the Louisiana Farm Bureau Federation, *or designee*	**Ronnie Anderson**
The Chair of the Louisiana Black Farmers Association, *or designee*	**Harper L. Armstrong**
The Executive Director of the Office of Community Development, Division of Administration	**Traci Watts**
The Executive Director of the Louisiana Housing Corporation, *or designee*	**Keith Cunningham**
The Chair of the Broadband for Everyone in Louisiana Commission	**Leslie Durham**
Director of Academic Outreach, Cybersecurity Taskforce (Lousiana Cybersecurity Commission)	**Kevin Nolten**
The chair of the Rural Water Association, *or designee*	**Pat Credeur**
Dean of the Louisiana State University College of Agriculture, *or designee*	**Billy Richardson, MD**
One (1) representative of the telemedicine initiative	**Adam Terry**
One (1) member of the Louisiana Bankers Association	**Darryl Ellerbee**
Five (5) members with qualifications deemed appropriate by the governor, which shall include being a rural businessperson	**Ben Nevers**
Five (5) members with qualifications deemed appropriate by the governor, which shall include being a rural businessperson	**James Davidson**
Five (5) members with qualifications deemed appropriate by the governor, which shall include being a rural businessperson	**Clint Vegas**
Five (5) members with qualifications deemed appropriate by the governor, which shall include being a rural businessperson	**Toni McAllister**
Five (5) members with qualifications deemed appropriate by the governor, which shall include being a rural businessperson	**Purvis Morrison**

Appendix D – Subcommittee Reports

EDUCATION

Educational Research

Louisiana State University (LSU) and Southern University and A&M College (SU) are Louisiana's two land-grant universities. As part of their respective land-grant designations and missions, they are mandated to participate in applied research activities impacting agricultural and food systems, family and consumer sciences, and rural prosperity. They do so via their respective agricultural centers. In recent years, the critical research conducted at the LSU and SU agricultural centers has been delayed due to reductions in funding for research and experiment stations. Regular investments must be made in these agricultural research programs, especially for research affecting rural communities in Louisiana.

It has widely been proven and accepted that investments in research are an important contributor to economic growth in local communities. Improvements through innovations have historically been catalysts in improving economic vitality and growth. An investment in agricultural research technology via the LSU and SU agricultural centers is an investment in Louisiana's future. In a time where the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed so many deficiencies in our most vulnerable communities and populations, these two research entities can play a critical role in addressing these societal, technological, health, economic, and access issues.

Education ROIs

The ROI of a graduate with a postsecondary credential or high-value industry certification is significant. For example, on average graduates from two-year colleges in Louisiana earn about $45,000 in the first year following completion. That same graduate's tax contribution to Louisiana in sales tax, property tax, and personal income tax is just more than $4,000 annually. The state's allocation of funding to the LCTCS returns the full annual investment in about 14 months producing a taxpayer that is highly likely to remain in Louisiana and contribute to the tax base long term. Universities can document a similar story for their graduates.

Education Health Development

In looking to the qualifications of those who would desire an advanced degree in medical education, a possible path could be akin to the European model of identifying students at a young age (as early as fifth grade) who have a desire to pursue a professional health career (medicine, dentistry, nursing, etc.) who could then be offered the type of education that would allow a competitive edge in the application process for these higher schools of education. That brings about the possibility of recruitment from the smaller communities and parishes. The student could then have a desire to return to those same communities in order to practice where they would have significant community connections (e.g., parents, siblings, cousins). The timely consideration of this principle would then advance the replenishment of practitioners to areas of rural need and, therefore, provide a matrix of support to these smaller regions–bolstering the economic stability of the area.

Education and Childcare Deserts

"Childcare deserts" are common in rural areas where there are more than three young children for every licensed childcare slot. Louisiana Department of Education data indicates that in many rural parts of the state, fewer than 20% of economically disadvantaged children ages infant to three are currently served. This reality affects the ability of parents to participate in the workforce and in education and training programs. Almost one-half of parents, both men and women, missed work regularly in Louisiana due to childcare issues, according to a 2017 survey well before the current pandemic complicated matters even further. In fact, prior to the pandemic, childcare issues cost Louisiana employers more than $800 million annually and continue to result in a $1.1 billion loss to Louisiana's economy each year (Losing Ground, 2017).

AGRICULTURE

Agriculture and the FFA

The FFA is a progressive organization that prepares students for college as well as the workforce through cutting-edge career and technical education paired with leadership development. A recent study on workforce preparedness for high school students revealed that, for every agricultural science/industry training course taken, a student would increase their salary by $1,500 making these courses critical for career development. A letter from Commissioner Strain and Dr. Bill Richardson, LSU agricultural center vice president for agriculture, was sent to all superintendents on May 26 with a copy of the Louisiana FFA Association Impact Report. The letter requested all superintendents to review and share the information with their faculty and consider adding or expanding agriculture science and industry training courses to their curriculum.

Agriculture and the LDAF's Role

The Louisiana Department of Agriculture and Forestry is the largest regulatory agency in the state and oversees many programs to promote, protect, and advance agriculture and forestry. The department relies on self-generated fees and general fund dollars. Budgets for state agricultural centers cannot sustain any further cuts. From researching new varieties of crops to providing parish level extension services, our agricultural centers provide critical research and resources to Louisiana's agricultural industries.

Agricultural Infrastructure Investments

As noted in a statewide survey, the need for distribution centers for various agricultural and forestry products (including livestock, crawfish, rice, pellet, grain, cane, and wood) was listed among the priority needs. New Orleans Cold Storage (NOCS) expansion is an opportunity for state/private investment that will reduce cost and increase efficiency for Louisiana poultry and seafood industries, as well as bring additional poultry, pork, and beef business from neighboring states that might otherwise go to East or West Coast ports; Mobile, Alabama; or Houston. The Louisiana Agricultural Finance Authority (LAFA) is in the process of purchasing the former Providence Foods facility in Lake Providence with the intent to refurbish the facility and bring it back into commerce as a packaging and distribution shed for local farmers.

Agriculture Detailed Findings

The agriculture sector has been consistently challenged by commodity price fluctuations caused by weather events, trade disputes, and many other issues over the years. Deemed "critical infrastructure," this sector is vital to ensuring that Americans have a safe and abundant supply of food and fiber available. According to the Cybersecurity & Infrastructure Security Agency, this sector is almost entirely under private ownership and is composed of an estimated 2.1 million farms, 935,000 restaurants, and more than 200,000 registered food and fiber manufacturing, processing, and storage facilities. It accounts for nearly 20% of the economic activity within the United States.
The most significant issue the COVID-19 pandemic caused is the disruption to the food and fiber supply chain. Processing facilities in the state and around the United States had to close or scale back production due to lack of workers. The closure of restaurants, hotels, and schools caused a drop in food and beverage demands, while at the same time there was a surge in grocery store purchases with the public panic buying, often resulting in empty store shelves. While the food and fiber supply chain has been tested, it is no doubt rebounding, with grocery shelves being restocked.

What this event has pointed out is that having a stable and healthy workforce in the agriculture sector is vital to ensuring a stable supply of food and fiber. As part of this, the subcommittee recommends that there be more testing available to workers across the food supply chain to ensure they are not entering the workplace, whether it be a processing facility or a farm, and spreading the virus. This, along with ensuring that the CDC and OSHA guidance for workers and employers is strictly followed, are critical for maintaining the food and fiber supply chain. Testing alone is not enough to keep workers healthy. Employers must incorporate appropriate CDC and OSHA guidance to reduce the risk of worksite spread of COVID-19 and other infectious diseases, including through disinfection, distancing, barriers, and masks.

Looking at long-term priorities for rural revitalization, the subcommittee finds that there are several issues facing rural areas that must be addressed for rural revitalization, including the need for broadband internet access, funding for workforce training and programs targeted toward agriculture, increasing interest in pursuing agricultural education, heightened awareness of the benefits of the FFA, reforming the H-2A/B programs, the need for additional markets for agricultural products, the high cost of insurance, ensuring the availability of healthy foods in communities with food deserts, maintaining agricultural tax credits, ensuring agricultural programmatic funding, investment in infrastructure (roads, bridges, ports, rail, etc.), enhanced funding for programs through the SU agricultural center to increase diversity in the food and agriculture sector, and addressing water infrastructure needs to ensure safe drinking water and sanitary waste disposal.

The lack of broadband access in rural Louisiana is a major challenge. Many aspects of agriculture involve the use of technology, which requires broadband access. Precision agriculture technology and modern farm equipment require high-speed internet access. Moreover, the lack of broadband access also affects the ability of rural residents to access telehealth services, such as remote patient monitoring and patient consulting. Therefore, broadband access is not unique to the agriculture sector and impacts all sectors of the economy. We are in a unique period of time. With funding already available before COVID-19 through USDA Rural Development, and the problem of lack of access coming to the forefront as people stayed home during the pandemic, now is the time to finally address and correct this problem that has been discussed for far too long.

Regarding workforce development and training, there needs to be funding to workers and for apprenticeships. Students need to be reached at an earlier age to get them ready to enter the workplace. Agriculture needs to be a bigger piece of the industries that the LWC serves with more engagement by the office and its programs with the agriculture sector. Workforce development programs must be developed that are aimed at low-income areas and minority communities. There needs to be more public awareness about the varied jobs and skills needed in agriculture. Changing the perception that agriculture-related jobs are not high-technology is a priority.

Mr. Harlen Henegar, director of field operations at the LWC and Office of Workforce Development, participated in the May 19 meeting of the Food and Agriculture Task Force. Mr. Henegar informed the task force that he recently assigned a staff member to be the agriculture sector coordinator. This is a great first step to ensuring that agriculture is represented and a part of the programs available under LWC to help with training and retraining workers to meet current and future labor needs.

Further, the LDAF is in the process of implementing the Louisiana Agricultural Workforce Development Program. House Bill 69 of the 2020 2nd Extraordinary Session became Act 23 with the signature of Governor Edwards. Effective on October 28, 2020, this law creates the Louisiana Agricultural Workforce Development Program within the department, administered and supervised by the LAFA, to incentivize the creation and employment of internships by agricultural businesses in the state.

Agriculture in the 21st century is high-technology. Any perception to the contrary must be changed. Young people need to understand what modern agriculture is in 2021 and become interested in pursuing agriculture careers and studies, such as agricultural business, forestry, and agricultural and environmental sciences. Understanding that not all students will go to college, more robust efforts must be made to pique students' interest in exploring classes focused on trades, such as shop or mechanics.

The subcommittee received information on programs to provide financial incentives to agricultural businesses to hire interns and provide them with hands-on training to begin a career in agriculture. In Colorado, the Agricultural Workforce Development Program (AWDP) provides financial incentives to farms, ranches, and agricultural businesses to hire interns and provide them with hands-on training needed to begin a career in agriculture. Qualified businesses may be reimbursed for up to 50% of the actual cost of hiring an intern, not to exceed $5,000 per internship. The AWDP is the result of legislation introduced during the 2018 session of the Colorado General Assembly by the Young and Beginning Farmers Interim Study Committee. In its first two years alone, the AWDP has supported 27 internships at 20 different Colorado agricultural businesses for a total of $92,000. (See https://www.colorado.gov/pacific/agmain/agricultural-workforce-development-program.)

Additionally, the New Mexico Department of Agriculture's (NMDA) Agricultural Workforce Development (AWD) Pilot Program offers incentives to the state's agricultural businesses to hire interns. The AWD Pilot Program is intended to provide hands-on educational opportunities for students aspiring to careers in agriculture, as well as young or beginning farmers and ranchers. The AWD Pilot Program is the result of legislation (House Bill 315, the Agricultural Workforce Development Program Act) that passed and was signed into law in 2019. (See https://www.nmda.nmsu.edu/awd-applications/.)

H-2A/B programs are critical to the food and agriculture sector. Agriculture, horticulture, forestry, and seafood industries rely on H-2A/B labor to meet their workforce needs. Ideally, domestic workers would fill these jobs. However, domestic workers for related jobs are hard to find. This is not unique to Louisiana. As such, seasonal or temporary labor is vital to filling employment gaps by hiring workers from other countries. The H-2A/B programs are unworkable and cumbersome, and involve much "red tape." The process of hiring workers from outside the United States needs to be reformed and streamlined. This must be done at the federal level. A possible solution includes an "at-will" visa where employees do not have contractual commitments and can move between employers as seasons and labor demands change. In the end, industry needs a workable framework that provides for a legal, reliable workforce.

Another avenue for rural revitalization is unlocking of additional markets for agricultural products. This can be in many forms, including increased trade opportunities through opening of markets across the globe or enhanced marketing of Certified Louisiana products. The Certified Louisiana, Certified Cajun, Certified Creole, Certified Craft Beverage, and Certified Farm to Table logo program was established by the LDAF to promote Louisiana made, grown, manufactured, or processed products that are aimed at enhancing and promoting Louisiana's agricultural industry.
(See https://certifiedlouisiana.org/.)

This program does not currently receive any state general funds. This program has a lot of potential, and growing it will help Louisiana highlight and market all that is unique about Louisiana food and agricultural products. The only way to do this is to invest in it and fund it at an appropriate level. The investment of state general funds into the program will allow the department to reach untapped markets and aggressively promote Louisiana products. Additionally, during discussions on the need for additional markets in the Food and Agriculture Task Force, Mr. Buck Vandersteen, executive director of the Louisiana Forestry Association, recommended that the state be encouraged to utilize more wood in state construction projects. There are numerous economic and environmental benefits using wood. Forests cover 45% of Louisiana's land area and produce and abundance of trees for use in construction projects as well as personal consumer products.

The high cost of auto insurance has been a hot topic at the state capitol recently, as Louisiana ranks among the highest in the United States for auto and commercial insurance rates. The food and agriculture sector relies heavily on various modes of transportation to move products. The cost of insurance for trucks hauling raw agricultural products is a major concern that must be dealt with to ensure the economic viability for businesses to operate. Businesses simply cannot afford to keep paying these high insurance costs. Without these trucking businesses, the movement of products becomes more difficult. Moreover, these insurance costs are passed on to consumers in the form of higher costs of food and fiber.

The USDA Economic Research Service defines a food desert as a low-income census tract where a substantial number or share of residents have low access to a supermarket or large grocery store. In food deserts, there is limited access to nutritious and affordable food, and the lack of healthy foods has negative health consequences. According

to the USDA Economic Research Service (see https://www.ers.usda.gov/webdocs/publications/94849/err-270.pdf?v=5380), 15.8% of Louisiana households experienced food insecurity between 2016 and 2018, one of the highest rates in the nation. Moreover, data in recent weeks has revealed disparate impacts of COVID-19 on people of color. Focusing on the availability of nutritious and affordable food is critical in the battle against COVID-19 and other health concerns. Moreover, efforts must be made to encourage smaller scale agricultural production for personal consumption and for commerce.

Louisiana producers benefit from several agricultural and forestry state sales tax exemptions. Tax exemptions in the state include sales tax exemptions for purchases of fuel, feed, seed, fertilizer, pesticides, livestock pharmaceuticals, qualifying machinery or equipment, fuses, belts, wires, conveyor belts, lubricants, etc. Producers, loggers, and paper and wood manufactures all benefit from these, which are a major component of their profitability. As the crawfish industry is struggling due to loss of sales restaurants, for example, the sales tax exemptions crawfish farmers received for the purchase of bait, feed, supplies, or equipment is vital to keeping them in business. This is just one example, but it is critical, not only during these times, but at other times as well to maintain these exemptions to keep our farmers and industry in business. The legislature must keep these in place.

The LDAF is responsible for administering many of the programs and enforcing the regulations that impact every aspect of the state's agriculture and forestry industry. At the farm and forest level, these industries contribute $13 billion annually to the state's economy. When the many support industries are included, agriculture and forestry touch the lives of everyone in Louisiana, making them critical to the economic growth and prosperity of the state as well as a vital part of our rich cultural heritage. Thus, the LDAF is the largest regulatory agency in the state and oversees many programs to promote, protect, and advance agriculture and forestry. Specific programs include the pesticide program, seed program, weights and measures program, forestry firefighting, crop pest and disease program, and animal health and food safety programs, among others.

The department relies on both self-generated fees and general fund dollars. In order to keep Louisiana's agriculture moving forward, it is critical that the legislature ensure that the department's funding does not decrease, and its statutory dedicated funds are not swept for general government purposes. Many different industries in agriculture pay fees that are dedicated to administering programs. This revenue is expected by these industries to be used exclusively for what they are specifically dedicated to.

Additionally, the budgets for the LSU agricultural center and the SU agricultural center have been cut drastically over the years. From researching new varieties of crops to providing parish-level extension services, they provide critical research and resources

to Louisiana's agricultural industries. As the world population is expanding, the demand for food and fiber production also increases. Food production must double by 2050 to meet this demand. Thus, research is critical to agriculture as producers rely on scientists to develop new knowledge and technology to supply food, fiber, and fuel. Moreover, extension offices allow for the latest research-based information to be delivered to all Louisiana citizens. Extensions' efforts support sustainable agriculture production, environmental awareness, and improved quality of life. These programs are crucial for Louisiana producers and any efforts at further budget reductions will cripple their ability to provide these vital services.

The rural infrastructure in Louisiana is deteriorating, which is a major limiting factor in commerce. As Louisiana's rural areas are home to much of the state's natural resources, they are the major source of food, fiber, and energy. The state must invest in infrastructure (roads, bridges, rail, ports, etc.) for business to locate and thrive, and to effectively and efficiently move products to markets. Investment in rural infrastructure is critical to the agriculture and forestry industries and the economic viability of rural communities.

One such investment is the opportunity to expand NOCS at the Port of New Orleans. While located in New Orleans, this project will have a positive impact on rural Louisiana through significant secondary private investment in the poultry industry and related corn and soybean production to provide the necessary feed supply. Devastated by Hurricane Katrina and the closure of the Mississippi River–Gulf Outlet Canal, NOCS was rebuilt and expanded both at the original sight at Jourdan Road and a new facility at Henry Clay Ave. Founded in 1886, NOCS is the oldest cold storage company in North America.

The company is one of the largest suppliers to poultry exporters in the country and operates facilities with more than 17 million cubic feet of refrigerated space in New Orleans, Houston, TX and Charleston, SC. NOCS is planning a major expansion with state/private monies to include a 133,750 square foot expansion of blast-freeze and cold storage warehouse space at Jourdan Road Terminal. These are the types of projects that grow and expand commerce. This project will reduce cost and increase efficiency for Louisiana poultry and seafood industries, as well as bring additional poultry, pork and beef business from neighboring states that might otherwise go to East or West coast ports; Mobile, Alabama; or Houston.

As noted in the statewide survey, the need for distribution centers for various agricultural and forestry products (including livestock, crawfish, rice, pellet, grain, cane, and wood) was listed among the priority needs. The LDAF will work to address and facilitate such needs in partnership with Louisiana Economic Development, the USDA, and other entities.

The subcommittee discussed that there is renewed interest in meat processing/ small-scale livestock slaughter facilities. The LDAF will be working with the USDA on a program for financing as well as the necessary educational expertise in order to do the slaughtering, meat cutting, and to gain knowledge of all the necessary requirements.

As of the writing of this report, in furtherance of the need for investment in rural areas, the LAFA is in the process of purchasing the former Providence Foods facility in Lake Providence. The intent is to refurbish the facility and bring it back into commerce as a packaging and distribution shed for local farmers.

The SU agricultural center needs enhanced funding to expand programs aimed at increasing the number of minority farmers in the state. Not only should efforts be made to increase the number of minority farmers, but there must be a targeted focus on getting information on funding opportunities to expand their operations and ensure they are able to stay in business. Additionally, there needs to be funding for programs that actively recruit minorities into the food, fiber, and agriculture sectors.

The subcommittee also identified water quality and sanitary waste disposal as issues that must be addressed. Safe drinking water and sanitary waste disposal systems are critical to public health and economic development. According to the Rebuild Rural Coalition, more than 94% of America's drinking water suppliers serve communities with less than 10,000 people, and many rural water systems struggle to comply with federal clean water and drinking water standards. (See https://rebuildrural.com/sites/default/files/2020-04/Water_2020_final.pdf.)

The USDA provides funding opportunities for safe, modern, and reliable water systems. Rural water systems must take advantage of the federal funding resources available. As an example, the Henderson Nina Water System was recently awarded $8,512,000 through the USDA Water and Waste Disposal Loan and Grant program for water and wastewater infrastructure upgrades. Moreover, the state must provide funding mechanisms for rural water systems to make necessary upgrades.

Finally, the average crop loan for farmers has steadily increased over the past five years and now average nearly $6 million. Farmers must have the available resources to access financing to stay competitive. Rural businesspersons and entrepreneurs often face difficulties accessing capital to help start, grow, and expand their businesses. Closures due to COVID-19 has exacerbated the problems within the current business climate. We are seeing businesses shut down as they could not sustain the impacts of COVID-19. Innovative solutions and strategies are needed for capital access.

The Interagency Task Force on Agriculture and Rural Prosperity, established by Presidential Executive Order 13790, recommended in its final report (see https://www.usda.gov/sites/default/files/documents/rural-prosperity-report.pdf) to President Trump that future strategies include:

- Equity financing: Allowing new obligations in federal and state loan and credit programs to be used to meet equity requirements, or a first-loss position, could help rural communities bring additional financing to the table.
- Debt financing: With renewed focus and goals for agricultural and nonagricultural lending in rural counties by both the Department of Agriculture and Small Business Administration (SBA), SBA is able to provide loans up to $5.5 million.
- Bundle/repackage projects and deals: A legal/finance vehicle to bundle projects can bring the necessary scale to attract private sector interest and take advantage of economies of scale to deliver cost savings.
- Regional and state collaboration: Projects can draw upon larger revenue streams when approached regionally. There are more financing options and deeper expertise when statewide and regional entities are involved.

INFRASTRUCTURE

Strategic Pillars

Infrastructure includes transportation, drainage and flood control, municipal wastewater collection and treatment. The mission of the Infrastructure Subcommittee is to sustain and improve infrastructure in rural areas as a foundation for economic growth and enhanced quality of life.

Goals and Objectives

Infrastructure Goal 1: Strengthen and sustain transportation infrastructure and services in rural areas. The Louisiana Statewide Transportation Plan contains numerous recommendations for achieving this goal.

Objectives:

1.1 Increase funding for state highway pavement preservation by January 2022 to facilitate commerce and personal travel.

1.2 Establish a state-funded program by January 2022 to assist local governments with the rehabilitation of parish-owned and municipal-owned roads to facilitate commerce and personal travel.

1.3 Increase funding for state-owned bridge preservation by January 2022 to facilitate commerce and personal travel.

1.4 Increase funding for parish-owned and municipal-owned bridge preservation by January 2022 to facilitate commerce and personal travel.

1.5 Increase funding for highway safety programs by January 2022 to improve the safety of rural travel.

1.6 Increase funding for the Port Priority Program, particularly for projects that improve the efficiency of transport of agricultural, forest, and other rural products, by January 2022.
1.7 Support the establishment of a state-funded rail retention and infrastructure program by January 2022 to help maintain the viability of short-line railroads in rural areas.
1.8 Upgrade general aviation airport infrastructure to meet minimum standards to support business, medical, and personal needs in rural areas by July 2026.
1.9 Provide state funding for a portion of rural transit annual operating expenses by January 2022 to meet current needs and future expansion as Louisiana society continues to age.

Infrastructure Goal 2: Reduce flooding and flood damage in rural areas.
Objectives:
2.1 Continue the ongoing development and implementation of the Louisiana Watershed Initiative (LWI).
2.2 Use the LWI hydrologic and hydraulic models to evaluate impacts and determine the risk profile associated with residential, commercial, and industrial real estate development, and to evaluate potential flood control projects to determine upstream and downstream impacts immediately upon model completion.
2.3 Promote actions, including legislative, administrative, and regulatory, where appropriate, to enhance watershed and floodplain management in Louisiana.
2.4 Continue to support the LWI Regional Capacity Building Grant Program's goal in supporting strong and effective governance for the eight provisional watershed regions and the establishment of regional commissions with authority to implement LWI plans and recommendations. Enact legislation establishing governance by July 2022.
2.5 Work with local governments to enact ordinances and policies that restrict development in flood-prone areas by July 2026.
2.6 Sustain the Flood Control Program administered by DOTD at the current level of funding.

Infrastructure Goal 3: Repair/rehabilitate municipal wastewater collection and treatment systems serving rural communities.
Objectives:
3.1 Develop an inventory of municipal wastewater collection and treatment systems by July 2022.
3.2 Assess the condition of the systems and estimate repair/rehabilitation costs by July 2024.
3.3 For each system, determine whether it can be self-sustaining following repair/rehabilitation, including consolidation with other systems by July 2025.

3.4 Identify alternatives to the repair/rehabilitation of existing systems by July 2025.
3.5 Establish a funding program to repair/rehabilitate those systems that can be self-sustaining or to pursue alternatives to repair/rehabilitation for those that cannot be self-sustaining by July 2026.

Initiatives
Infrastructure Objectives 1.1 through 1.9: Achieving these objectives will require new revenues. An effort to increase revenues should be undertaken in the 2021 Regular Session. Once enacted, implementation of these objectives can begin immediately with virtually no "ramp-up" period.

Infrastructure Objectives 2.1 through 2.6: Implementation of most of these objectives is already underway and no new funding is required. However, legislation regarding governance will likely be needed in the 2022 Regular Session. It does little good to develop flood-control plans if there is no legal authority for implementation. Objective 2.6 calls for sustaining the current level of funding for the Flood Control Program administered by DOTD.

Infrastructure Objectives 3.1 through 3.5: Objectives 3.1 through 3.4 will require one-time funding in FY 2021 for a consultant contract to develop and inventory and assessment of municipal wastewater collection and treatment systems in rural areas. The level of annual funding for the new program called for in Objective 3.5 cannot be determined until the inventory and assessment is largely completed. A funding source will also need to be identified.

Resource Assessment
Infrastructure Objectives 1.1 through 1.9: Achieving these objectives will require new revenues. An effort to increase revenues should be undertaken in the 2021 Regular Session. The 2015 Louisiana Statewide Transportation Plan calls for an increase in state revenues of up to $700 million annually with periodic inflation adjustments to address transportation needs in both rural and urban areas.

Infrastructure Objectives 2.1 through 2.6: Implementation of most of these objectives is already underway and no new funding is required. Objective 2.6 calls for sustaining the current level of funding for the Flood Control Program administered by DOTD; these revenues are from the State Transportation Trust Fund.

Infrastructure Objectives 3.1 through 3.5: Objectives 3.1 through 3.4 will require one-time funding of $3 to $4 million beginning in FY 2021 and extending through FY 2025 for a consultant contract to develop an inventory and assessment of municipal wastewater collection and treatment systems in rural areas. The level of annual funding for the

new program called for in Objective 3.5 cannot be determined until the inventory and assessment is largely completed. A funding source will also need to be identified.

FINANCE

Finance Resource Assessment

According to financial sources, governments that do not issue debt in the municipal market very often tend to pay a premium on interest and borrowing costs because investors are not familiar with them. In 1986, bank-qualified bonds were created to encourage banks to invest with these smaller, less frequent issuers by giving the banks tax breaks related to buying and holding the bonds. Bank-qualified bonds also saved those municipalities money on borrowing costs, because they allowed municipalities to bypass the traditional underwriting system and sell their tax-exempt bonds directly to local banks.

BROADBAND

RRC Broadband Subcommittee submits the following recommendations with 3 focus areas: access, adoption, and affordability

Access (Availability):

1. Develop and maintain a statewide broadband map to identify served, unserved and underserved areas as defined in the Broadband for Everyone in Louisiana State Plan. An application to the Economic Development Association (EDA) by applicants Louisiana Department of Transportation and Development (LDOTD), and Louisiana Planning and Development Districts (LPDD) has been submitted and funds are expected by the end of quarter one 2021. These funds will allow LPDD to begin to collect the necessary data to identify at need populations. This data will then be stored at LDOTD. Additional dollars are being sought in this grant to contract a consultancy to make supplemental recommendations. Rural mapping is needed to assist providers with data to ensure more successful applications for federal grant funding.
2. Efforts in largescale broadband rollout can be maximized by Identifying barriers and encouraging solutions by revealing incentives and promoting collaboration among all stakeholders.
3. Support the Public Private Partnership model. This model has the ability to leverage grant dollars through local governments and nonprofits that private companies alone cannot.
4. Reassess and modify The Local Government Fair Competition Act RS 45:844.41 to align with current and future needs of all rural communities.
5. Update the current Broadband for Everyone in Louisiana State Plan to meet and exceed the Telehealth needs for each community. This can be achieved by setting the minimum committed download and upload speed to the individual community's healthcare need. There existed an urgent need for expanded telehealth services in Louisiana's rural communities prior to the COVID-19 event. This current health emergency has only exacerbated that need. Through meeting telehealth needs on a community basis other internet connectivity related issues would also be addressed. The resulting increase in connectivity would provide increased access to education, online commerce, and recreation opportunities.

Adoption:

6. Ongoing efforts to increase online participation must be actively encouraged. As a result of current Covid-19 safety protocols nearly every Louisianan has increased the scope of their online activities. Any ongoing promotion of increased internet participation should be redoubled with particular focus towards the areas of: economic development, healthcare, and education.
7. Sharpen the focus on potential cybersecurity threats. As an increase in connectivity increases the scope of individuals' activities online new risk arise. It is vital state cybersecurity departments increase their efforts to protect Louisiana's citizens.

Affordability:

8. Federal and State programs need to be identified or created to assist or subsidize low income families to access broadband internet. Affordability has been identified as a barrier for low-income families to access existing internet services. As a result, many are losing opportunities to access food, education, banking, telework, telehealth, online education and to connect with friends and family. This lack of internet access increase COVID-19 exposure risk for low-income families.
9. The Louisiana State Legislature must fully fund the state office of broadband created in the 2020 Second Extraordinary Session ACT 24, HB74 by Representative Daryl Deshotel. Efforts of rural revitalization can be aided by funding this office with a grant program to provide gap funding assistance for census tracts that qualify as being unserved or underserved but fall outside of federal assistance areas.
10. Efforts of the state broadband office must align with the guidance and recommendations of the Broadband for Everyone in Louisiana Commission.

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

The Economic Development Subcommittee identified a number of issues that require attention. These issues include: a lack of awareness regarding available programs for rural areas, a need for enhanced small business support, the need to create a collaborative approach to community and economic development, a climate requiring more leadership training, housing blight, and a need for enhanced Main Street development.

1. Increase the awareness of existing programs which serve rural communities.
   With the stated goal of increasing awareness of resources currently available to rural constituents we must develop and deploy a robust communications plan. This plan must first recognize existing examples of successful rural revitalization through economic development. Secondly, parties interested in rural revitalization should work to identify key stakeholders and service providers amongst rural constituencies. Additionally, work is needed that offers information regarding economic development partners and resources.

2. Enhance small business support.
   Develop and fund systems which provide financial support to small business. These systems could include loan programs, gap funding, and seed capital. State projects should prioritize the use of Louisiana small businesses whenever economically feasible, with an acute focus on women, minority and veteran owned businesses. State agencies need to more aggressively market small businesses.

3. Undertake a collaborative approach to community and economic development.
   Interested parties must Identify public and private rural stakeholders engaged in economic development activities. There is a need to push for participation in the local community development Housing and Urban Development (HUD) Action Plan for use of CDBG/HOME funds. Networks of support for local and regional programs must be strengthened. Work is needed to build stronger alliances with economic development organizations. Such organizations can include: chambers of commerce, Planning and Development Districts, as well as federal agencies.

4. Increase the uptake of leadership training
   Parties interested in rural revitalization must collaborate with key allies to develop leadership training modules that raise awareness around community and economic development. Additionally, there exists a need to increase the rate of completion of existing leadership training programs. These efforts can be accomplished by enhancing the capacity-building training for local government officials in cooperation with statewide stakeholders including: Louisiana Municipal Association (LMA), Louisiana Police Jury Association (LPJA), and Louisiana Housing Corporation. To identify gaps in community, and economic development, training programs an assessment of available programs must be undertaken. Working with statewide stakeholders these gaps must be filled.

5. Decrease Housing Blight
   To reduce housing blight a comprehensive identification of agencies currently engaged in blight reduction must be undertaken. These agencies must be bolstered though the shared alignment of best practice policy. There also exists additional need to raise awareness of the pervasiveness of this issue. parties interested in rural revitalization must continue to engage in policy development and legislative remedies. Statewide stakeholders currently working on this issue include: LMA, The Main Street Program, and the Office of the Lieutenant Governor.

6. Increase support for and participation in Louisiana's Main Street Program.
   It is vital to support increased funding for the Main Street Program. Efforts must also be undertaken to increase interagency collaboration between: The Office of Culture Recreation and Tourism, Louisiana Economic Development, and the Department of Transportation and Development. Rural revitalization can be aided by support to arts and cultural place making grants. These grants could help community leaders develop a unique and vibrant atmosphere within their communities, including the opportunity to build a diverse economy of small and local businesses that are as unique as and look like the communities that they serve.

CLEAN WATER

1. Rural Water Mutual Aid agreements for utilities and licensed specialist must be developed. The utilities providing water to various parishes of the State desire to provide a method whereby water utilities that have sustained physical damage from natural, man-made or pandemic disaster could obtain emergency assistance in the form of qualified personnel, equipment, generators, tools, materials and other equipment necessary to operate a water system.

Secondly, the state and federal funding and regulatory agencies need to be involved with assisting utilities with different types of loans and grants. The Governors Rural Water Infrastructure committee (RWIC), Office of Community Development (OCD), Louisiana Department of Health (LDH) Drinking Water Revolving fund (DWRLF), United States Department of Agricultural- Rural Development (USDA-RD) funding programs and others meet on a regular basis to educate and direct these utilities to the right funding source.

Lastly, a program to assist smaller utilities in developing payment plans for customers after a storm or during a pandemic must be developed and implemented. Utilities could charge their customers a "rainy-day fee" of $1.00 to $2.00 per month. These funds could be used after a disaster natural, man-made, or pandemic to pay for customers' water bills. The monies could only be used after a disaster occurs.

2. We need to assist utilities in Louisiana with vigilance of our precious resources especially with drinking water. Assist water utilities with how to locate and repair water leaks by using up to date leak detection equipment. This will conserve water and lower their electrical consumption.

There are over 1,300 water systems in Louisiana. There are more rural water systems in the state of Louisiana than urban utilities. In 2015 approximately 8,720 million gallons per day (Mgal/d) of water was withdrawn from groundwater and surface-water sources in Louisiana, a %2.6 increase from 2010. Total groundwater withdrawals were about 1,750 Mgal/d, an increase of %12 from 2010, and total surface-water withdrawals 6,790 Mgal/d, an increase of %0.44 from 2010 to 2015.

3. There is an immediate need to provide some type of local or state funding for utilities to upgrade their water systems. Undertake a comprehensive statewide evaluation of each water system for: upgrades, needed repairs and infrastructure replacements. Have water utilities that can't manage, operate and are not financially stable connect to an adjoining utility. These water systems are constantly out of compliance with LDH regulatory standards and are the most frequent systems requesting funding for repairs. These same utilities can't keep certified water operators/specialist because they do not have the capabilities of paying a decent salary. The LRWA has an apprenticeship program that could help maintain certified operators/specialists

WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

1. Educate rural communities about the various workforce development programs available statewide through government, private, nonprofit programs and partnerships. Prioritize workforce development programs which are focused on maximizing employment, retention and increasing credential attainment. Additionally, need exists to create a web based portal that houses all information about workforce development programs. The scope of programs listed should include: apprenticeships, customize training programs, incumbent working training, on-the-job training (OJT), internships or work experience.

2. To best encourage rural revitalization interested parties must provide or facilitate delivery of supportive services to assist with meeting workforce challenges and needs. Services such as transportation, childcare, dependent care, housing, and needs-related payments, are necessary to enable an individual to participate in work related activities.

3. Create regional specific promotional campaigns to increase awareness of workforce needs and available opportunities in rural communities. Targets could include rural: high schools, chambers of commerce, nonprofits, and religious organizations. Examples of workforce needs in rural Louisiana include but are not limited to certified nursing professionals, and certified water or wastewater operators. Targeted marketing campaigns could drive up recruitment to meet this unfulfilled need.

4. Create innovative service delivery strategies such as broadband access and distance learning by partnering with local broadband providers and public Wi-Fi entities (i.e. local libraries) to ensure that internet access is available for virtual learning and training opportunities.

5. Small businesses are vitally important to local economies by bringing both growth and innovation. It is vital that stakeholders promote small businesses especially in rural communities. By creating a rural small business focused department the footprint of revitalization within the community will increase. To do so efforts must be made to coordinate with local, state, and federal partners to educate rural communities and businesses on various business incentives including potential tax reductions, worker supportive services, worker training and recruitment. Small businesses of all types build the bedrock of a diverse local economy, including those owned and operated by: women, minorities, and veterans. State resources and databases should be leveraged to the best of their ability to assist in the viability of these businesses including the Veterans First Business Initiative and various specialty small business certifications.

HEALTHCARE SUBCOMMITTEE

1. It is essential that universal broadband access be accomplished throughout all of Louisiana. It is essential for tele-health and tele-education. With universal broadband services, the healthcare well-being of rural citizens will greatly improve.

2. Rural hospitals and healthcare delivery systems are vital to the survival of the rural communities. Without local, reliable healthcare systems, there would not be substantial educational systems, in addition to, economic development. The Rural Hospital Preservation Act, which was made into law by the State Legislature, is exemplary of how laws can be passed to protect rural communities. The core of this Act mandates that the State Legislature and State Government must provide financial and legislative support for rural hospitals throughout the state. The Rural Hospital Preservation Act must be maintained at all costs.

3. Healthcare providers should be incentivized to choose rural areas to practice their profession. That includes not only physicians but also allied health providers, nursing professionals, pharmacists, and dental science graduates. Various ways and means of accomplishing these incentives are available within the legislative and executive branch functions.

4. We must develop systems for enhancement of healthcare literacy for our population in an intra-professional manner. Media-based or community-based educational presentations of rural hospitals, or Federally Qualified Health Centers (FQHC), University and Community Hospitals, and LSU Agriculture Center (4-H Clubs) could

be employed. Without uniformity of healthcare literacy throughout Louisiana's citizenry, our healthcare outcomes will always lag behind national standards.

5. Patients who live in rural communities face unique challenged when attempting to receive effective treatment for mental illness and mental health conditions. The following are obstacles to providing behavioral health services:

a. Desire to receive care
b. Lack of anonymity when seeking care
c. Shortage of mental health professionals
d. Transportation to and from healthcare facilities

The expansion of telehealth services would address many of these barriers. Telehealth services would give residents of rural communities the access they need to healthcare services. The need for mental health services is often emergent. Infrastructure for internet services is lacking in many rural areas and would be a necessity in providing telehealth services. If telehealth services could be provided in conjunction with primary care services, this would provide a continuity that is often missing between the primary care and mental health professionals. Enhanced reimbursement for telehealth services would encourage providers to participate in providing these services to rural communities.

6. Legislators passed Act 805 in 2008 to help establish a loan repayment program to recruit physicians to rural communities. This Act has never been funded.

In conjunction with the Rural Hospital Coalition and the Governor's Office, funds for this incentive program have been approved. The Act provides forty physician loan replacement scholarships per year for at least 5 years, as well as needed primary care physicians to rural hospitals.