



Georgia HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

PRESS RELEASE

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Speaker Ralston and House Rural Development Council Leadership Announce Creation of Center for Rural Prosperity and Innovation

ATLANTA – House Speaker David Ralston and the leadership of the House Rural Development Council (RDC) today announced the creation of the Center for Rural Prosperity and Innovation. The RDC is co-chaired by State Representatives Terry England (R-Auburn) and Jay Powell (R-Camilla). State Representative Sam Watson (R-Moultrie) serves as vice chair of the council.

“The Center for Rural Prosperity and Innovation at Abraham Baldwin Agricultural College (ABAC) was created by the General Assembly and Governor Deal as the state’s central resource for research and training on economic development and opportunity in rural Georgia,” said Speaker Ralston. “I am proud that the recommendations of the House Rural Development Council are being put into action. I want to thank our partners at ABAC and the University System of Georgia (USG) for their work in getting this center up and running.”

“ABAC is a natural home for the center with its geographic location, talent and resources,” said Rep. Powell. “They have the ability to work with other USG institutions as well as all state agencies to move all of rural Georgia forward.”

“Georgia’s rural communities face many unique challenges, and the RDC has worked meticulously to identify these challenges and present workable solutions,” said Rep. Watson. “It has been a great honor to work alongside my Georgia General Assembly colleagues to pass legislation for the good of rural Georgia, and I’m pleased that one such bill will soon establish the Center for Rural Prosperity and Innovation to provide our state’s rural citizens with vital support.”

House Bill 951, sponsored by State Representative Jason Shaw (R-Lakeland) during the 2018 legislative session, provided for the establishment of the Center for Rural Prosperity and Innovation. This center, which will be located within ABAC, will serve as a central information and research hub for rural leadership training and best practices. The center will also partner with

public and private community stakeholders to identify and support projects that will lead to prosperity through entrepreneurship, job creation, community engagement and cultural enhancement.

“I'm excited that the Center for Rural Prosperity and Innovation will serve as a valuable resource to rural Georgia,” said Rep. Shaw. “It has been a tremendous honor to serve on the RDC and to author this legislation. The RDC has worked diligently on behalf of our state's rural citizens and communities, and I'm confident that this center will further the RDC's mission in exploring ways to bolster economies in our state's rural areas.”

With funds allocated for the Center for Rural Prosperity and Innovation in the Fiscal Year 2018 budget, the center's short-term strategic plan has been developed and services have been contracted to develop a strategic and operational communications plan including critical identity materials, such as logos and branding, and a website for the center. ABAC facilities personnel have been engaged to prepare Gaines Hall to house the center and draft partnership agreements have been developed.

Additionally, job descriptions for the center have been developed for the following positions: director, which will be filled by ABAC President David Bridges as interim director until a director is named; associate director, which has been filled by Scott Blount; and center logistics and operations manager, which has been filled by Bridgett Mobley.

“ABAC hit the ground running with the RDC last year and never backed off,” said Rep. England. “Dr. Bridges and Scott Blount have been at every meeting with us along the way and have provided invaluable input in our work. I look forward to seeing the results of the work they have already completed.”

Sixteen potential projects have been identified, several of which will be announced at the RDC meeting this month in Elberton, Ga. The center is also actively soliciting partnerships with the University of Georgia, the Georgia Department of Agriculture, USDA Rural Development and the Georgia Chamber of Commerce.

“From the beginning, we said the Rural Center would be outcome-based, and that is precisely what we plan to be—less of a ‘think tank’ and more of a work horse,” said Bridges. “We believe it's time to reintroduce all that this state's small towns and rural communities have to offer.”

For more information on HB 951, please click [here](#).

For more information on the Center for Rural Prosperity and Innovation, contact Mary Catherine Gaston at mcgaston@ruralga.org.

David Ralston (R-Blue Ridge) is the 73rd Speaker of the Georgia House of Representatives. He represents Fannin and Gilmer counties as well as a portion of Dawson County.

Representative Terry England represents the citizens of District 116, which includes portions of Barrow County. He was elected to the House of Representatives in 2005 and currently serves as Chairman of the Appropriations Committee. He also serves on the Agriculture & Consumer Affairs, Education, Industry and Labor, Natural Resources & Environment and Ways and Means committees.

Representative Jay Powell represents the citizens of District 171, which includes portions of Colquitt, Decatur and Mitchell counties. He was elected to the House of Representatives in 2008 and currently serves as Chairman of the Ways and Means Committee. He also serves on the Governmental Affairs, Judiciary, MARTOC and Rules committees.

Representative Sam Watson represents the citizens of District 172, which includes portions of Colquitt, Thomas and Tift counties. He was elected to the House of Representatives in 2012 and currently serves as Chairman of the Small Business Development Committee. He also serves as Chairman of the Rural Caucus and as Secretary of the Retirement Committee, as well as on the Appropriations Subcommittee on Economic Development and on the Agriculture & Consumer Affairs, Natural Resources & Environment, Special Rules, Transportation and Ways and Means committees.

Representative Jason Shaw represents the citizens of District 176, which includes all of Atkinson and Lanier counties and portions of Lowndes and Ware counties. He was elected to the House of Representatives in 2010 and currently serves as Chairman of the Appropriations Subcommittee on Transportation. He also serves on the Economic Development & Tourism, Game, Fish & Parks, Industry and Labor, Insurance and Small Business Development committees.

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