



GEORGIA'S RURAL CENTER

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OPINION: RURAL GEORGIA POISED FOR POSITIVE CHANGE DURING 2019 LEGISLATIVE SESSION

Aside from my parents, the single greatest influence on who I am and what I've been able to accomplish is this: I am from rural Georgia.

I realize that I am fortunate to have been brought up where and how I was brought up, and my roots are still firmly planted in the red dirt of Terrell County, just as they have been for the past six decades. That is why I consider it a tremendous honor and responsibility to lead the Center for Rural Prosperity and Innovation, or as our team calls it, Georgia's Rural Center. It is also the reason why I am reaching out to all rural Georgians to join the Center, rural legislators and me in making this a historic year for rural people and the places they call home.

Hard work by Speaker Ralston, the Rural Development Council, the Georgia House of Representatives, the Georgia Senate and Governor Deal led to passage of HB951 during the last session. In addition to re-creating the Rural Development Council, the bill established Georgia's Rural Center and tasked it with facilitating innovation and economic development in rural Georgia. The Center exists to reconnect rural and urban Georgia and reinvigorate once-vibrant places by re-creating proven, innovative business models and investing our state's most valuable resource—human capital—where it's needed most.

As the 2019 legislative session begins this week in Atlanta, Governor Kemp and rural legislators have pledged to work on behalf of rural Georgians. The staff of Georgia's Rural Center and I are ready to tackle the challenges that face the people of Georgia's small towns and rural communities. I urge you to join our team.

If you've spent a lifetime in rural Georgia like me, you have undoubtedly noticed how the place you call home has changed over the past few decades. While I hope all Georgians share my pride in and appreciation of the economic upsurge our urban areas have enjoyed during this time, we are wise to recognize the geographical extent of that success. Outside the state's largest cities, the scene is a stark contrast.

Georgia's rural areas are faced with challenges distinct from other regions of this state: population loss, inadequate access to health care, disintegrating infrastructure, diminished opportunity for quality education,

scarcity of employment opportunities, overall absence of economic growth, and sometimes, lack of cultural amenities.

Rural Center staff participated in all of the House Rural Development Council listening sessions across the state. We joined other rural leaders in sharing—not just about the challenges we see facing rural Georgia, but also potential solutions to those challenges.

As a result of these gatherings, the HRDC drafted a set of recommendations that will guide their efforts during the 2019 legislative session. Released in mid-December, the recommendations focus primarily on economic development, rural infrastructure and health care needs and reflect some of the most pressing obstacles to rural prosperity and innovation.

We anticipate that elected officials will work swiftly and precisely on the recommendations. Never in my recollection has there been such widely held support for rural people and places as there is in Georgia's Capitol right now—from both political parties and a broad range of public officials. The time to make specific, meaningful and positive change for rural Georgia is now.

I encourage you to play your part by reading the HRDC's legislative recommendations on our blog at www.ruralga.org/blog and keeping up with what is happening throughout the session on our Facebook page and blog. I urge you to contact your state representatives, Lt. Gov. Duncan and Gov. Kemp and share with them your thoughts on rural issues and the efforts being made by our elected officials.

As a proud product of rural Georgia, I am certain that with the right approach, we will not only rediscover the power and potential of the state's less populated areas, but also redefine what it means to be rural in this state. It is time to reinvest in small towns and rural communities, and there's no better opportunity than while lawmakers are in Atlanta over the next few months. I hope you will join us in this vital work today.

David Bridges
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