 Reimagining the Rural West

Survey

**Background**

The Western Governors’ Association (WGA) represents the Governors of 19 Western states and 3 U.S.-flag islands. WGA is an instrument of the Governors for bipartisan policy development, information exchange, and collective action on issues of critical importance to the Western United States.

*Reimagining the Rural West* is the central policy initiative of incoming WGA Chair, North Dakota Governor Doug Burgum. *Reimagining the Rural West* will explore how Governors can support vibrant and enduring rural communities by enhancing economic development, infrastructure, and quality of life. The initiative will identify common challenges and opportunities, highlight best practices and success stories, and provide a forum for the development of bipartisan policy solutions.

WGA is engaging stakeholders in the West to help scope the initiative before the June 2019 kickoff. This survey is intended to help WGA identify: priority issues for gubernatorial leadership; best practices in community and economic development in the West; participants for planned workshops and other engagement; and federal policy issues for potential WGA advocacy.

**Who Should Complete the Survey?**

Anyone with experience and expertise in rural community and economic development in the West is encouraged to submit responses. We hope to gather insights from a variety of perspectives representing all of WGA’s states. You may skip sections or questions. Please provide any additional information, topics, or recommendations you believe would be helpful for WGA as it develops this initiative (even if it is not prompted by a specific question below).

Responses are requested by February 15, 2019, but there is no deadline for submittal.

Please contact WGA’s Lauren DeNinno (ldeninno@westgov.org) with any questions or for more information on the initiative.

**Respondent Information**

**Name:**

**Title:**

**Organization:**

**Email Address:**

*Structure and Organization*

1. How does your state structure and staff its work on rural community and economic development (e.g. through a single agency, an interagency commission, a staff person in the Governor’s office)? Do you find this model to be effective? What, if any, suggestions do you have for improving how your state coordinates its rural community and economic development efforts?
2. Do other structures or organizations coordinate rural development efforts among stakeholders in your state, including community organizations, foundations, local governments, and businesses?
3. In your view, how are Governors uniquely positioned to advance rural development in their states? How can they best leverage their leadership and office to improve outcomes for rural communities? Consider convening power, human capital management and the bully pulpit, as well as leadership on programs, policies and funding.
4. How does your state, local government, or organization engage with tribal communities when addressing rural challenges? Is tribal consultation a formal component of your state policy-making process?

*Rural Community and Economic Development*

1. What are the major demographic dynamics affecting rural communities in your state or sub-state region? What are the primary factors driving these demographic changes?
2. To what extent do the following issues affect the economic potential and quality of life in rural communities in your state or sub-state region? Which pose the most significant challenges? Which offer the greatest potential for improvement or progress?
	* 1. Childcare, K-12 education, higher education;
		2. Workforce training, early career opportunities, retraining in the face of economic transition;
		3. Healthcare access, cost of insurance, cost of care;
		4. Housing availability, affordability, quality;
		5. Infrastructure, water and wastewater treatment, broadband;
		6. Transportation, transit systems.

Are there programs, policies, initiatives, or organizations tackling these challenges that WGA should investigate and consider sharing as part of this effort?

1. Based on existing policy, WGA has identified certain economic sectors as potential elements of this initiative. These sectors include outdoor recreation; energy; and restoration and conservation services. Do these industries present viable avenues for diversifying the rural economy and promoting economic growth in your state or region? Are there state and local programs to support growth in these sectors? What other economic sectors offer significant economic growth potential in your state?
2. What are the biggest obstacles to attracting and growing businesses in rural communities in your state (e.g., lack of infrastructure; broadband availability; workforce shortages; permitting challenges; or housing, health care and educational gaps)? Please be specific about these obstacles and make note of strategies underway to address these challenges.
3. Are there additional strategies that your organization, locality, or state is using to improve quality of life or attract and retain talent in rural communities? If so, please provide details.

*Rural Infrastructure*

1. What are the primary challenges to improving infrastructure, including broadband infrastructure, in rural communities? Are there specific federal statutory or regulatory changes, including changes to funding, that could mitigate these challenges?
2. Given the cost of maintaining existing infrastructure and transportation systems, have communities in your state developed new approaches to infrastructure investment to maximize the long-term viability of projects undertaken today?
3. To what extent are community development goals, (e.g. walkable Main Street) integrated into infrastructure planning and project prioritization?
4. Are state, county and local governments planning for rapid technological change, disruptive technologies or the deployment of “smart” infrastructure in their rural infrastructure investments? If so, how are they doing this? If not, do you think they should and what would this look like in your state?
5. Do rural communities in your state have adequate infrastructure in place to support land management priorities such as wildfire mitigation, wildlife habitat rehabilitation or water quality improvements? Does the state have a method of identifying these infrastructure needs in local communities and encouraging their development?

*Federal Policy, Funding, and Intergovernmental Coordination*

1. Are there obstacles to accessing federal funding, technical assistance, or other resources for rural communities? Do federal funding opportunities align with the financial needs or priorities of your community and/or organization? Is it difficult to meet eligibility requirements or complete application processes? Are there transaction costs (such as reporting requirements) or barriers to funding access (such as collateral effects on eligibility for other funding sources)? Please cite specific programs and obstacles.
2. What specific changes to the structure or implementation of federal programs and funding streams would afford states, local governments, and rural-focused organizations additional access to, or flexibility in the use of, those funds?
3. How could federal agencies better coordinate their programs, policies, and people to improve the delivery of services and resources to rural communities? Please provide clear and actionable suggestions.
4. After a wildfire, flood, or other natural disaster, how does the state coordinate with federal agencies, local governments, and tribes on disaster response? Does the state have a mechanism to prioritize and coordinate disaster relief response efforts and funding from private and public sources? Are disaster relief response efforts integrated with broader economic development and land restoration objectives?

*Socioeconomic Data*

1. Who in your state should WGA contact as an expert on socioeconomic data, analysis, or its application?
2. What data sources do you rely on to provide a picture of how rural communities are faring? What are the major disconnects between the data you need to understand rural realities and available data? To what extent do you supplement federal data with additional data collected at the local, county, or state level?
3. Are there ways that existing data collection, compilation (development of baselines), and analysis advance or constrain decision-making or policy development? Are there changes in federal data collection and publication practices that have affected their utility?
4. Can data collection, compilation, and analysis be easily scaled from the local level to a state, regional, or national scale? Would scaling and/or automation affect the accuracy of the socioeconomic profile of rural communities?
5. Do you have suggestions for how federal agencies could better incorporate state- and locally-generated socioeconomic data into their decisions? What funding or other types of decisions does reliance on federal data – rather than local or state data – most affect?

*Participation*

1. Would you like to continue receiving information about this initiative, such as opportunities to participate in workshops and webinars?
2. Please provide the names of any individuals, entities, or organizations should WGA contact to learn more about the issues discussed above.

Thank you for your time. We sincerely appreciate your contributions to help shape this important initiative. Please submit your completed survey to Lauren DeNinno (ldeninno@westgov.org).