



THE WHITE HOUSE CONVENING ON RURAL PLACEMAKING

The White House Rural Council
in partnership with
Project for Public Spaces
The National Main Street Center
November 17, 2015

You never know the most important things in your life as you're going through them. I want to reinforce this particular moment ... the fact that we were having a rural placemaking event in the White House of our nation.

-Charles Fluharty, President and CEO, Rural Policy Research Institute

Major Themes and Takeaways from the Discussion

1. Creating Networks

This convening provided a strong starting point, but we must continue to carry these conversations beyond this room. With 14 months left in the administration, we must identify and focus on actionable, short-term next steps moving forward.

- “We see a lot of people doing the same thing and not talking to each other” (Mickey Howley). We need to create a variety of networks linking philanthropies and government, national nonprofits that are not already collaborating, etc.
- Establish a collaborative peer-sharing network or “cohort” so we can learn of *and* from each other’s efforts, challenges, success stories, and best practices.

2. Building Local Capacity and Partnerships

Many rural communities lack capacity to develop impactful projects and/or secure funding. How can we better connect federal resources with communities, and how can we get training resources to the communities that can benefit from technical assistance? Which actors/organizations can serve as intermediaries between the federal government and those without the capacity or ability to navigate those waters?

- Funding for “**Lighter, Quicker, Cheaper**” tools is needed. Because it is “focused on the immediate and the possible,” the approach can help build capacity by stimulating interest, momentum, and community buy-in.
- “Partnerships between sectors is central to making rural areas thrive” (Lisa Mensah). More partners are needed. How do we create more integration with these agencies and partners as a way of streamlining applications processes and leveraging the investments once they’re made?

3. The Importance of Storytelling

“Places are vessels for stories” (Tara McGuinness). Our stories, and the stories of our communities, are crucial to placemaking efforts and for creating the resources to support it. How can we best communicate and disseminate these stories?

- **Language:** In order to facilitate further **de-siloing** and to **build trust** and connection with communities, we need to work harder to break down language barriers, and to develop consistent messaging. Eliminate jargon and get out of our acronyms – both can be exclusive and alienating.
- **Trust is key.** Make sure the end results are clear: what we are doing, why, and who is benefiting. **“Community change happens at the speed of trust”** (David Leckey).

4. Institutionalizing Placemaking and Place-led Development

Because it is “long-term effort to get people on board with this kind of place-consciousness” (Tara McGuinness), we need to further integrate and institutionalize place-led efforts at federal, state, and local levels

- **Organize trainings** for career federal staff so the philosophy and approach extend beyond current administration.
- We need career professionals to **embed these conversations** so they become part of a long-term effort to make Placemaking more available, accessible, and usable in communities everywhere.

Key Quotes from Speakers and Participants

“In many ways we are the builders of rural America. (...) When you engage communities, when you spend time finding out what they see as their future, think of rural development as the partner you need at the next step.”

- Lisa Mensa, Under Secretary for Rural Development, USDA

“There is a lot of hardship, but there are also a lot of terrific things going on in rural America, and those are often fueled by two demographics - boomers and millennials - who are moving back, choosing to stay in these places, investing in these places – which is in turn fueling mini housing booms and creating jobs.”

-Patrice Frey, President and CEO, National Main Street Center, on the multigenerational character of today’s small towns.

“Everything we need is already here in our towns ... Everything and everybody we need is already there.”

- David Leckey, Executive Director, Orton Family Foundation, on recognizing the skills, capacity, and resources that already exist in our communities.

“No community change happens overnight, nor does it happen with one party.”

-Tara McGuinness, Senior Advisor, White House Office of Management & Budget, on federal realignment and how ordering federal agencies to be place-conscious with their budgets has led to a proliferation of place-conscious *policymaking*, and more statistical analysis on how and why place matters.

“The forgotten small town can be the new frontier.”

-Mickey Howley, Main Street Manager, Water Valley MS

“Since the New Deal, our programs have been set up to treat the symptoms of economic decline. We need to set up a system where communities themselves can re-invent their economies. To build great places that are good for each other, good for the environment, good for public health, we need your ideas.”
-Doug O’Brien, Senior Policy Advisor for Rural Affairs, White House Domestic Policy Council, asking for suggestions on how the federal government can better support placemaking in rural communities.

“We need to expand the discussion of economic development to one that includes innovation and places.”
-Fred Kent, President and Founder, Project for Public Spaces

“We can use placemaking to be more inclusive and drive the equity conversation in rural America.”
-Tim Lampkin, Lampkin Consulting Group, Clarksdale, MS

“There is this craving, this sense of place and connectedness, that is only provided in small town America. Placemaking helps us unlock the power of place and intensify that sense of connectedness; it is a path to longer term economic transformation.”
-Patrice Frey, President and CEO, National Main Street Center