



Moderator's Guide

Rural Prosperity: Making Choices for Your Community

What are the best choices for your community? This discussion guide is designed to stimulate thinking on the question and to help you choose a path to the future for your community. The guide does not advocate a specific solution or point of view. Rather, it is intended to inspire thoughtful examination of differing points of view and a movement towards common ground around which the community can make plans for its future.

As the moderator, you might remind participants at the beginning of the discussion that communities typically have limited resources. As they consider the choices that the community might make, they should keep in mind that making one choice in many cases means not being able to afford another. While they might think that all of the choices are a good idea, where would they place their priorities?

Equipment/Supplies Needed

- *Rural Prosperity* issue booklet for each participant
- Pre-Forum and Post-Forum Questionnaires for each participant
- Pencils/pens for completing the questionnaires
- Flip chart and markers
- Ground rules poster (optional)

Free copies of the issue booklet and questionnaires can be obtained from the Southern Growth Policies Board. Call Niraj Goswami at (919) 941-5145 to place an order. The materials can also be downloaded and copied from Southern Growth's Web site, at www.southern.org.

Suggested Format for a Two-Hour Forum

Welcome (5 minutes)

Introduce yourself and tell participants about the organization(s) convening the forum. Stress the co-sponsorship if several organizations are involved.

Give a brief introduction about the importance of rural economic development, noting that more than one-third of the residents of the South live in rural areas.

Explain that the results of the forum will be shared with Southern leaders through the Southern Growth Policies Board, by saying something such as the following:

This booklet was prepared by the Southern Growth Policies Board. Southern Growth is a public-private partnership of 14 states, including our own. Formed by the region's governors in 1971, Southern Growth Policies Board develops and advances visionary economic development policies. It provides a forum for collaboration among a diverse cross-section of the region's governors, legislators, business and academic leaders and the economic- and community-development sectors.

Participating in this forum means that many Southern leaders will hear your views. Southern Growth plans to prepare a report on forum results that will be presented to the governors and other Southern leaders at the 2005 Conference on the Future of the South, scheduled for June 12-14, 2005 in Point Clear, Alabama. You are also invited to attend the conference to hear what others are saying about future directions for rural development in the South.

Pre-Forum Questionnaire (5 minutes)

Ask participants to complete the Pre-Forum Questionnaire. Explain to participants that the Pre-Forum Questionnaire is a way to get everyone focused on the issue and a way for each participant to take inventory of their initial feelings on the issue. Tell them that there will be another questionnaire for them at the end of the forum.

Ground Rules (5 minutes)

Review ground rules with participants before beginning the discussion. Make clear that the forum is not a debate. Stress that there is work to do (this is not just a free flowing discussion with no purpose), and the work is to move toward making plans for the community's future. The work will be done through deliberation.

The moderator should guide the discussion yet remain neutral. Make sure that:

- Everyone understands that this is not a debate.
- Everyone is encouraged to participate.
- No one or two individuals dominate.
- Every approach is considered fairly and fully.
- An atmosphere for discussion and analysis of alternatives is maintained.
- Participants listen to each other.

The moderator should ask the group if they agree with these rules and invite them to suggest others to add to the list.

Moderators can call the Kettering Foundation at (800) 433-7834 to request a free poster that outlines these ground rules.

Personal Stake (15 minutes)

Connect the issues to people's lives and concerns by getting participants to talk about their personal experiences with the issue. This makes the issue human rather than abstract. Some questions you might ask include: "How many of you now live in – or grew up in – a rural area?" "How has the changing rural economy affected you or family members?" "What do you find most appealing about living in a rural area?" "What are some of the drawbacks, if any, to living in a rural area?"

Reviewing Possible Approaches (45 minutes)

The next step is to review and deliberate each approach, one-by-one, roughly 15 minutes each. Deliberation requires weighing the "pros" and "cons" of different approaches so it is important to be sure that both are fully aired. Questions to help ensure a fair and balanced examination of each approach include:

- What makes this approach a good idea? What do you find most appealing about it?
- What are the costs or consequences associated with this approach? Is there a downside to this approach?
- How might others see this approach?
- What would someone who favors this approach be likely to say?
- If we followed this approach, what would be the effects on your life?
- How might your concerns differ if you were poor? Lacked a high school education? Were a business owner?

Review of Approach One: Collaborate Regionally

Begin with an overview of the approach, such as:

A community's economy is not self-contained. Decisions on where businesses invest are increasingly made on a regional – not local – basis. Likewise, workers commute and residents shop throughout an economic region that crosses community boundaries. Few communities can offer everything to everybody. The way to create critical mass is through regional collaboration and identity building.

Initiate discussion by using the general questions outlined above or some below:

- What benefits, if any, do you think the community would gain from building relationships with neighboring communities?
- What unique assets or strengths might be combined on a regional basis in your area?

- Has your community had any experiences in working with other nearby communities?
- Do you see any barriers or challenges to cooperation between communities in your region?

Review of Approach Two: Embrace Change

Change is constant. Most rural businesses, institutions and development practices were created when farming and factories could be counted on to create prosperity. The challenge isn't to stop change but to master it. We need to prepare for new jobs, businesses, neighbors, and ways of life.

Initiate discussion by using the general questions outlined above and/or some of the following:

- What major changes, if any, have taken place in your community over the past 20 years?
- How well have institutions in your community – or those serving your community (colleges or community colleges, for example) – adapted to these changes?
- How active a role do you think government should play in encouraging entrepreneurship? Do you think that young people in your community see entrepreneurship as a job option in their future?
- How would you describe the relationships between immigrants and native residents in the community? What impact would improving relationships between these groups have on the community's future?

Review of Approach Three: Level the Playing Field

Investing in the basics – water, sewer, roads, bandwidth and industrial parks or research centers – will level the playing field and give rural communities the means to compete. Rural areas already offer an attractive quality of life, but need more modern amenities in order to make them attractive to high growth businesses.

Initiate discussion by using the general questions outlined above or some below:

- Think about the quality and availability of infrastructure in your community. What, if anything, needs improvement – or is not currently available at all?

- In what ways can isolation be a drawback to living in a rural area? What are some ways you can think of to overcome these drawbacks?
- It's typically more expensive to provide infrastructure, such as water and sewer, to sparsely populated rural areas than to more densely settled communities. Do you think such investments are a good use of government funds? Why or why not?

Working through tensions or conflicts (15 minutes)

Again, you might remind participants that communities typically have limited resources. As they consider the choices that the community might make, they should keep in mind that making one choice in many cases means not being able to afford another. While they might think that all of the choices are a good idea, where would they place their priorities? To help them think this through you might ask them to imagine that they only have \$2 per resident (or some other appropriate figure) to invest in the community. How would they invest this money?

Help participants see and work through the tensions or conflicts between the approaches by asking some of the following types of questions:

- What do you see as the tensions between the approaches?
- Can anyone think of something constructive that might come from the approach that is receiving so much criticism?
- Should rural communities band with their neighbors to develop a regional identity, EVEN IF it means losing some of their individual identity?
- Should rural communities reinvent themselves, EVEN IF it means letting go of some of the things that helped build their community?
- Should rural communities make major investments in modern infrastructure EVEN IF it means raising taxes?

Moving towards a shared sense of purpose (15 minutes)

Remind people that the objective is to work toward a decision. Test to see where the group is going by asking questions such as:

- Can someone suggest areas that we seem to have in common?
- What values appear to be in conflict?
- What trade-offs are we willing (or unwilling) to accept?

- What are we willing to do as individuals or a community to solve this problem?

Ending the Forum (15 minutes)

Before ending a forum, take a few minutes to reflect on what has been accomplished. Questions like the following have been useful:

Individual Reflections

- Did you hear anything that surprised you?
- Has your thinking about the issue changed?
- Has your thinking about other people's views changed?
- How has your perspective changed as a result of what you've heard in this forum?

Group Reflections

- What remains unsolved for this group?
- Can we identify any shared sense of purpose or direction?
- What trade-offs are we, or are we not, willing to make to move in a shared direction?

Next Steps

- What do we still need to talk about?
- How can we use what we learned about ourselves in this forum?
- Do we want to meet again?

Post-Forum Questionnaire (5 minutes)

Ask participants to complete the Post-Forum Questionnaire. Please collect both pre- and post-forum questionnaires and return them along with a *Moderator Summary Sheet* to Linda Hoke, Southern Growth Policies Board, P.O. Box 12293, Research Triangle Park, NC 27709. This information will be used to help inform Southern leaders about citizens' views on this issue.

4. What were areas of disagreement, if any?

5. Did the group identify possible actions or next steps? Please describe.

6. What unique information came out of the forum that our leaders need to know?

Please return this *Moderator Summary Sheet*, along with pre- and post-forum questionnaires, to: Linda Hoke, Southern Growth Policies Board, P.O. Box 12293, Research Triangle Park, NC 27709.