

**BUILDING THE FOUNDATION FOR A ROBUST RURAL DEVELOPMENT POLICY
SUMMARY RESULTS FOR THE 2012 RURAL LISTENING POSTS**

Sponsored by the Office of Lt. Governor Sheila Simon

**With Support from the Illinois Institute for Rural Affairs
and the Governor's Rural Affairs Council**

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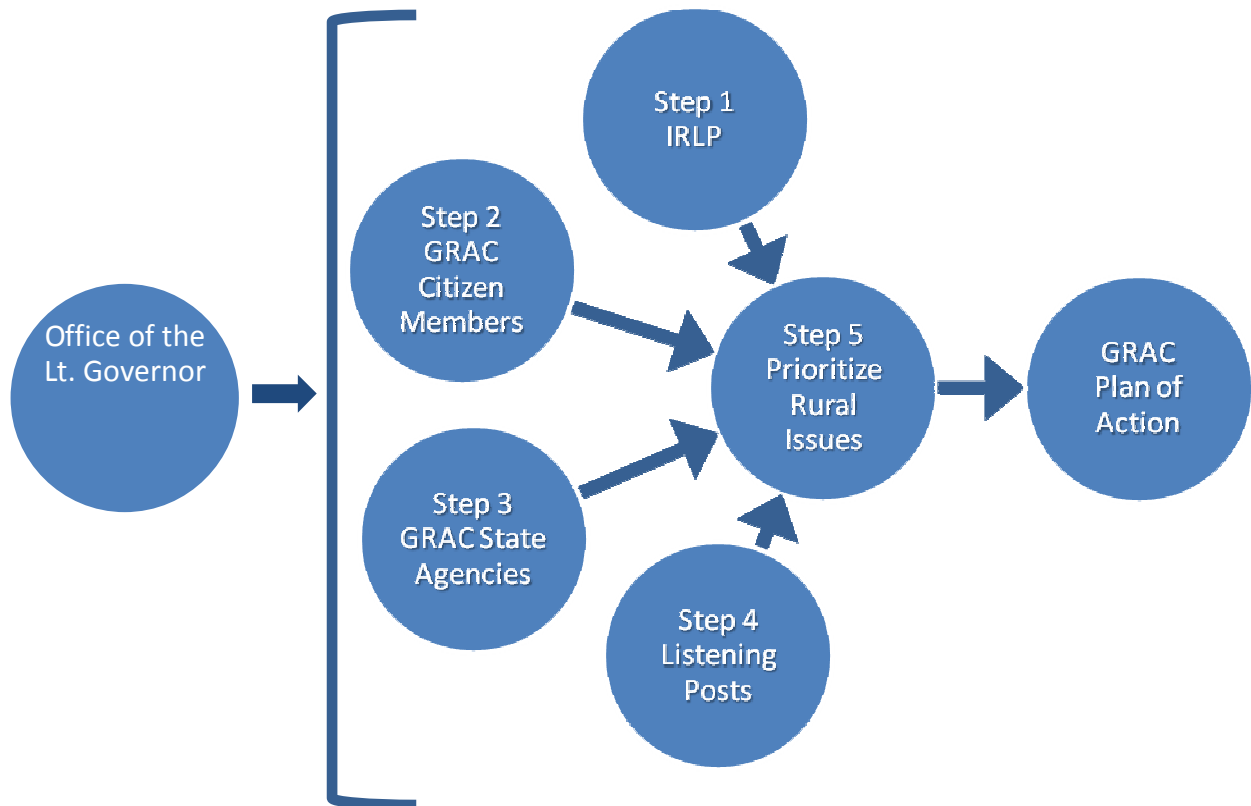
BUILDING THE FOUNDATION OF A ROBUST RURAL DEVELOPMENT POLICY

Introduction

Rural regions constitute an important constituency in Illinois and across the United States. While the rural population only represents about 10 percent of the Illinois population, two-thirds (66) of the 102 counties in Illinois are either non-metro or micropolitan. Only 36 are metropolitan. Hence, rural places remain an important part of the Illinois landscape. The challenge facing advocates for rural places is to develop sound policies that will help places survive and even thrive in the 21st century despite the increasing urban bias in public policy.

In order to identify the issues confronting rural Illinois, and to map out a strategy for promoting rural development, the Office of the Lt. Governor, the Governor’s Rural Affairs Council (GRAC), and the Illinois Institute for Rural Affairs undertook the most comprehensive analysis of rural issues since the state created the GRAC in 1989. This process involved 5 steps of data collection and analysis using surveys and face-to-face community dialogues (Fig. 1). The purpose of this report is to provide a summary of this overall process, and then provide a specific summary of the Rural Listening Posts.

Figure 1. Methodology for Creating a Rural Development Plan for Illinois



A Methodology: Gathering Data for Crafting Rural Development Policy

Step 1. Illinois Rural Life Poll

The first step involved conducting the Illinois Rural Life Poll (IRLP). This was a statewide poll of 8,000 Illinois residents living in rural and urban counties. A stratified random sample was used to ensure that adequate numbers of rural and urban respondents were identified from across the state so that rural versus urban comparisons could be made. Financial support for this survey was also provided by Rural Partners[®]. This survey was conducted in fall 2010 with 1,087 people responding for a 13.6 percent response rate. The questions contained in the survey focused on eight categories of economic development and quality of life issues including the respondent's assessment of their own well-being and that of their community over the past five years. Respondents were also asked to predict the trajectory of their well-being, and that of their community, over the next five years (Table 1). The purpose of the IRLP was to gather data from a broad cross section of the general population to identify important themes affecting individuals and communities across the state. In a sense, this was a benchmarking effort to start the prioritization of issues.

Table 1. Categories of Questions Asked in the 2010 Illinois Rural Life Poll

- 1. Quality of Life**
 - 2. Current Local Services / Infrastructure**
 - 3. Local Economy**
 - 4. Youth, Education and Workforce Training**
 - 5. Agriculture**
 - 6. Health, Housing, and Welfare**
 - 7. Public Services**
 - 8. Respondent Demographics**
-

The first set of questions asked respondents to categorize their perception (1 = much worse and 5 = much better) of the ways the quality of life, including their financial situation has changed for themselves and their communities over the last five years. Respondents were then asked to predict the changes in their quality of life and financial situation, and to predict the changes for their community, over the next five years.

In the second category of questions, respondents were then asked to evaluate the quality of local services using a Likert scale where 1 = very dissatisfied and 5 = very satisfied. Specific services ranked by respondents included public safety, access to the internet, medical services, transit and transportation, housing, parks and recreation, local government, and waste management.

The third set of questions asked respondents to use a Likert-scale rating system to rank the most important issues affecting their respective local economies. Topics explored included the importance of attracting new businesses to the area, the match between local workforce skills and job requirements, attracting new people to the community to counter the effects of outmigration, and providing opportunities for job advancement in local businesses.

Next, respondents were asked to consider issues pertaining to youth, education and workforce training. Again, using a Likert scale, respondents were asked to rate issues such as the adequacy of school funding, the quality of local schools, internet access in local schools, and the ability of local schools to prepare students for college and gainful employment.

The fifth set of questions focused specifically on the role of agriculture in economic development. Both rural and urban respondents were asked to rate the importance of many issues related to agriculture and natural resource use including local foods systems, renewable energy such as biofuels (e.g. ethanol) and wind, and the importance of incorporating agriculture into local economic development strategies. The important point was to determine to what extent Illinois residents are thinking about agriculture beyond the growing of corn, soybeans and wheat. We wanted to measure how much citizens see agriculture as a means of creating jobs through value-added processing. This creates products of higher value in local communities, instead of simply producing lower value commodities which will be processed elsewhere.

The sixth group of questions explored respondents' attitudes about health, housing and welfare. Specific questions asked respondents to consider the current level and accessibility of mental health services, emergency services, access to specialized health care diagnostics (e.g. MRI), affordable housing for the elderly, recreational opportunities for children, access to childcare, affordability of health insurance, and the survival of local hospitals. These questions were asked with the current national healthcare debate in mind.

The seventh category of questions focused on local and state government services and efficacy. Respondents were asked about gaps in services as well as redundancies. A running theme across many of the question categories has been access to technology. In this section, respondents were asked to consider how technology such as improved broadband / internet accessibility might enhance the quality of local government services.

The final category of questions focused on respondent demographics, including the size of the community in which the respondent lived, age, sex, educational status, and employment status, among other demographic and geographic variables. The questions in the IRLP provide a broad overview of the concerns and aspirations of rural and urban residents across Illinois. While this benchmarking process was necessary, it was not sufficient in our view. With a topic as important as rural development, the views of affected people must be central. However, it is also important to consult with other rural development stakeholders.

Step 2. Polling the Citizen Members of the Governor's Rural Affairs Council

Up until 2010, the GRAC was comprised of state agency representatives. Lt. Governor Sheila Simon revamped the GRAC to also include six "citizen" members who represented local, regional, and private sector viewpoints, in addition to the statewide perspectives offered by the charter members of the GRAC. The six citizen members were asked to fill out the Illinois Rural Life Poll. In addition, the GRAC citizen members were also asked to make a presentation to the GRAC, identifying specific rural development issues beyond those explored in the Illinois Rural Life Poll. These viewpoints are important because these individuals are experts on local issues affecting rural communities. They are concerned about rural issues, not just because they happen

to live in rural communities. They are professionally engaged in rural and community development issues as part of their job requirements.

Step 3. Polling the State Agency Members of the Governor’s Rural Affairs Council

The Governor’s Rural Affairs Council was created to foster greater collaboration among Illinois state and nonprofit agencies that would not otherwise have a rural focus. Hence, at each GRAC meeting, every agency sends a representative with expertise in rural development issues. There are currently 18 state agency and nonprofit representatives participating in the GRAC (Table 2). Each agency was asked to have one of their rural policy experts to answer the questions from the Illinois Rural Life Poll. The hypothesis driving this strategy is to see if there are statistically significant differences between the general population respondents and those respondents who are experts in rural development policy, either as GRAC citizen members or GRAC agency members.

Table 2. Agency and Association Members of the GRAC

- Illinois Community College Board**
 - Illinois Department of Agriculture**
 - Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity**
 - Illinois Department of Human Services**
 - Illinois Department of Natural Resources**
 - Illinois Department of Public Health**
 - Illinois Department of Transportation**
 - Illinois Department on Aging**
 - Illinois Environmental Protection Agency**
 - Illinois Department of Employment Security**
 - Illinois Finance Authority**
 - Illinois Housing Development Authority**
 - Illinois State Board of Education**

 - Illinois Institute for Rural Affairs—Western Illinois University**
 - Southern Illinois University**
 - University of Illinois Cooperative Extension Service**

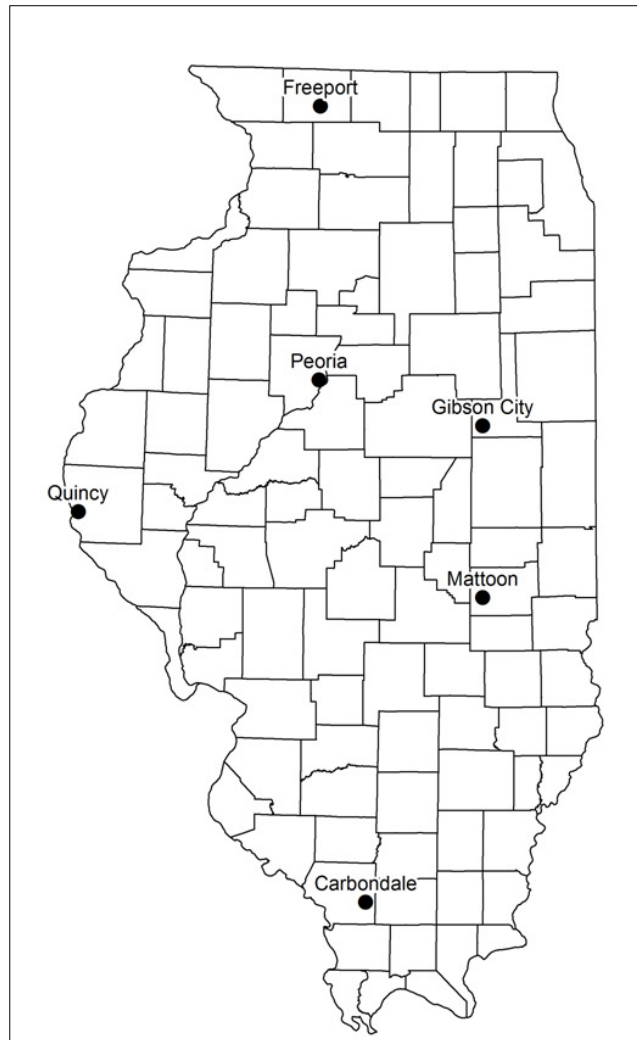
 - Illinois Agricultural Association/Illinois Farm Bureau**
 - Rural Partners**
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Step 4. Rural Listening Posts

The final step in the data gathering process was to conduct a series of rural listening posts or public forums where individuals (regardless of community standing) could attend and express their views on a range of rural community development issues. The rural listening posts had been done previously, but not in conjunction with other data gathering processes (See Appendix 1 for a brief history of previous listening posts). This is why we are able to say that this is the most comprehensive rural development data collection process since the creation of the GRAC. Six rural listening posts were scheduled across the state starting in Peoria on March 6, 2012. Subsequent listening posts were held in Carbondale, Mattoon, Gibson City, and Freeport,

culminating on May 10, 2012 with the final listening post in Quincy (Fig. 2). The selection of sites was done to ensure that geographically diverse viewpoints were included in the overall information collection process.

Figure 2. Location of Rural Listening Posts



Each listening post was scheduled to last two hours. At each listening post, a two-step process was used to gather information. In the first hour, a survey was administered using Turning Point Technology, an electronic polling system that enables participants to answer questions, tabulates the responses, and projects them using a PowerPoint presentation. Questions similar to those administered in the Illinois Rural Life Poll were posed to participants who could then respond quickly to each question as it was posed. In the second hour, participants were organized into groups of six to discuss the issues raised during the first hour. These issues included education, health, infrastructure, workforce development, internet, business climate, and quality of life. The ideas discussed during the roundtable discussions were recorded and transcribed by group

facilitators. This enabled us to conduct a frequency analysis of topics discussed at each listening post.

Step 5: Prioritizing Rural Issues

With the completion of the Rural Listening Posts, we had gathered information on rural issues using four different approaches, querying four different groups of stakeholders, from across the state. This data was gathered anonymously at a distance through the mailed survey and in a face-to-face method at the rural listening posts, which were all attended by the Lt. Governor and her rural affairs staff members. By using this multidimensional approach, incorporating both quantitative and qualitative methods, we can “ground truth” our benchmark data gathered through the Illinois Rural Life Poll. The broader point is that while we certainly rely upon expert viewpoints to shape rural policy, a central part of our strategy is to gather input from regular people in diverse communities from across the state.

The broader compilation of results from the Illinois Rural Life Poll, input from citizen members and agency representatives from the GRAC, and the Rural Listening Posts will be presented in the 2012 Annual Report of the GRAC and provide the basis for GRAC’s strategic plan, A Vision For Rural Illinois. The remainder of this report examines the results of the rural listening posts.

Overall Results from the Rural Listening Posts

Who Attended the Rural Listening Posts?

Rural Listening Posts were held in six communities in Illinois: Peoria, Carbondale, Mattoon, Gibson City, Freeport, and Quincy. In all, 362 people participated (Peoria 61, Carbondale 59, Mattoon 35, Gibson City 80, Freeport 80, and Quincy 47) (Table 3). Slightly more than half (54%) of the participants identified themselves as being from central Illinois, 28 percent from northern Illinois, and 16 percent from southern Illinois (Table 4). Two percent of the participants reported that they did not live in Illinois. This response was chosen in Carbondale, Freeport, and Quincy only—communities in counties located on the Illinois border (Figure 2). The largest attendance was at the Gibson City and Freeport Listening Posts, each with 22 percent of the total attendance. Peoria’s attendance was third highest with 17 percent of the total attendees, followed by Carbondale with 16 percent, Quincy with 13 percent and Mattoon with 10 percent.

Table 3. Attendance by site

Site	Number of Attendees	Percent of Total Attendance
Peoria	61	17
Carbondale	59	16
Mattoon	35	10
Gibson City	80	22
Freeport	80	22
Quincy	47	13
Total	362	100

Table 4. Which of the following best describes where you live?

	Peoria	Carbondale	Mattoon	Gibson City	Freeport	Quincy	Total	
							No.	%
Northern Illinois	6	1	0	0	68	0	75	28
Central Illinois	36	4	19	50	2	34	145	54
Southern Illinois	6	32	2	1	0	1	42	16
I do not live in Illinois	0	0	1	0	2	2	5	2
Total	48	37	22	51	72	37	267	

Attendees reported that they lived in either very small towns or larger cities for the most part. The majority of attendees (46%) reported that they lived in communities with populations of less than 5,000 (Table 5). The next highest response rate was 33 percent for attendees who reported that they lived in communities of 25,000 or more. Fewer attendees reported that they lived in communities of 10,000 – 24,999 (16%) or communities of 5,000 – 9,999 (5%).

Table 5. What is the population of the community where you live?

Site	Less than				Total	
	5,000	5,000 – 9,999	10,000 – 24,999	25,000 +	No.	%
Peoria	26	4	11	7	48	18
Carbondale	7	4	8	18	37	14
Mattoon	10	2	8	2	22	8
Gibson City	41	1	0	8	50	19
Freeport	19	3	13	33	68	26
Quincy	17	0	1	20	38	14
Total	120	14	41	88	263	

Attendees were also asked about the population of the communities in which they worked and had similar responses. Almost half (49%) of attendees reported that they worked in communities with a population of less than 5,000 and 30 percent reported that they worked in communities with populations of more than 25,000 (Table 6). Sixteen percent reported that they worked in a community with a population of 10,000 – 24,999 and 5 percent reported that they worked in a community with 5,000 – 9,999.

Table 6. What is the population of the community where you work?

	Peoria	Carbondale	Mattoon	Gibson City	Freeport	Quincy	Total	
							No.	%
Under 5,000	17	11	11	44	27	20	130	49
5,000 to 9,999	1	6	3	0	1	1	12	5
10,000 to 24,999	15	7	8	1	9	3	43	16
25,000 or more	14	13	0	3	35	14	79	30
Total	47	37	22	48	72	38	264	

The majority (86%) of attendees are employed or are small business owners with 26 percent of those employed in the public sector/government (Table 7). The attendees also tended to be older with approximately 65 percent over the age of 50 and 30 percent over the age of 60 (Table 8). Attendees were not asked their gender.

Table 7. Which of the following best describes your employer?

	Peoria	Carbondale	Mattoon	Gibson City	Freeport	Quincy	Total	
							No.	%
Public sector/ government	16	22	13	5	13	13	82	30
Public/private partnership (not- for-profit)	9	6	2	7	7	5	36	13
Private sector/ not-for-profit	9	5	2	15	8	9	48	18
Private sector/ for-profit	1	0	3	9	13	0	26	10
Small business owner/ self employed	10	1	1	7	18	2	39	15
Retired	2	2	2	8	12	2	28	9.6
Not employed	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0.4
Student	1	1	0	1	0	6	9	3
Total	48	37	23	52	71	38	269	

Table 8. What is your age?

	Peoria	Carbondale	Mattoon	Gibson City	Freeport	Quincy	Total	
							No.	%
18 years and younger	0	0	0	0	0	5	5	2
19 to 29	2	2	2	2	0	1	9	3
30 to 39	5	4	1	7	5	4	26	10
40 to 49	10	9	3	14	10	8	54	20
50 to 59	15	17	7	17	25	10	91	34
60 years and older	16	5	9	9	32	10	81	30
Totals	48	37	22	49	72	38	266	

Quality of Life Issues

Attendees acknowledged the challenges faced by their communities; approximately 56 percent answered that the quality of life in their community had become much or slightly worse in the last five years (Table 9). Thirty-two percent reported that quality of life had gotten slightly or much better and 11 percent reported no change. Attendees in Mattoon and Gibson City were more positive in their perceptions about the changes in quality of life, with 57 percent (Mattoon) and 52 percent (Gibson City) reporting that quality of life had gotten slightly or much better. In

contrast, 80 percent of attendees in Freeport and 69 percent of attendees in Carbondale reported that quality of life in their communities became much or slightly worse in the last five years.

Table 9. During the last five years, to what extent has the quality of life changed?

	Peoria	Carbondale	Mattoon	Gibson City	Freeport	Quincy	Total	
							No.	%
Much worse	2	5	0	2	22	2	33	13
Slightly worse	22	17	7	14	35	19	114	44
No change	9	4	2	9	4	2	30	11
Slightly better	12	5	10	19	9	13	68	26
Much better	3	1	2	8	1	2	17	6
Totals	48	32	21	52	71	38	262	

For the most part, attendees at the Rural Listening Posts expressed optimism about the future. When asked about their expectations about the quality of life in their communities in the next five years, 52 percent reported that they expected it to become slightly or much better (Table 10). There were regional differences in the response to this question and in Carbondale 50 percent of the attendees responded that quality of life would become slightly or much worse in the next five years. Attendees in Freeport were also less optimistic with 35 percent reporting that they believed that quality of life would become slightly or much worse. In contrast, 86 percent of attendees in Mattoon responded that they believed quality of life would become slightly or much better in the next five years.

Table 10. In the next five years, to what extent will the quality of life change?

	Peoria	Carbondale	Mattoon	Gibson City	Freeport	Quincy	Total	
							No.	%
Much worse	1	2	0	2	7	0	12	5
Slightly better	10	15	2	14	18	9	68	25
No change	10	5	1	9	16	7	48	18
Slightly better	25	10	14	19	24	20	112	42
Much better	2	2	4	10	7	2	27	10
Totals	48	34	21	54	72	38	267	

Specific Issues

Attendees were presented with a list of issues related to health care, education, infrastructure, business climate, broadband and workforce. These issues were identified in the Rural Life Poll and by the GRAC. Attendees were asked to pick the two most important issues in each category.

Health Care

Attendees chose access to affordable health care as the most serious health-care related issue impacting their region or community, with 32 percent choosing this issue (Table 11). This issue was also rated as most important at each of the Listening Posts. Overall, access and availability

of health insurance was rated as next in importance with 22 percent of attendees choosing this item. This item also rated as second in importance in Peoria, Mattoon, Freeport, and Quincy. Availability of local mental health care facilities was next in importance overall with 16 percent of attendees choosing this item. This was followed by availability of physicians (10%), local access to specialized health care (7%), availability of local dental care (6%), availability to ambulance/EMS service (5%), and availability of hospital/healthcare clinic (4%).

Table 11. What are the two most serious health care related issues impacting your region or community?

	Peoria	Carbondale	Mattoon	Gibson City	Freeport	Quincy	Total	
							No.	%
Access and availability of health insurance	24	12	8	23	26	19	112	22
Affordable health care	29	24	16	29	47	20	165	32
Availability of physicians	11	5	6	2	19	7	50	10
Local access to specialized health care	7	7	1	8	7	8	38	7
Availability to ambulance/ EMS service	6	4	3	6	3	2	24	5
Availability of hospital/ healthcare clinic	2	0	1	1	8	7	19	4
Availability of local mental health services	15	13	4	28	15	6	81	16
Availability of local dental care	1	5	0	8	8	7	29	6
Total	95	70	39	105	133	76	518	

The discussion also focused on the cost of health care. In addition to concerns about the cost to individuals, attendees discussed the issues that contribute to the overall cost of delivering health care including the cost of providing services to people sparsely dispersed over large rural regions and the challenges of maintaining a skilled workforce in rural areas. While attendees agreed that more access to technology such as electronic medical records was vital, they expressed concerns about the impact this will have on health care costs and how that could affect small rural hospitals and clinics and rural physicians and health care practitioners.

Also of great concern to the attendees were Medicaid and Medicare reimbursement rates and the delay in payments from the State of Illinois. Attendees stated that health care facilities and practitioners struggle to operate when this revenue stream is delayed. There is concern that more health care facilities and practitioners will be forced to turn away patients on Medicaid or who are covered by State sponsored health insurance.

Rural EMS also came up often in the health care discussions. The provision of this service in rural areas is challenging for many reasons. The shrinking and aging pool of volunteers common to many communities is particularly problematic in rural communities that provide EMS using volunteer staff. The cost and time commitment to these volunteers to meet the initial training requirement and to meet their continuing education requirements are particularly challenging for small rural communities. Attendees expressed the concern that, without reform, rural EMS will become a thing of the past.

Dental services were also seen as being at risk in rural areas. This is a two-fold issue. It is difficult to attract and retain dentists in rural areas and many dentists are hesitant to take Medicaid patients because of payment issues. Mental health and addiction services are also of concern. Again, these are costly services to provide and inadequate reimbursement rates and slow state payments make it difficult to maintain these services in rural areas.

When discussing solutions, attendees focused on finding ways to keep health care costs down through education of consumers and facilitating resource sharing and collaborations. Many mentioned the need to educate residents and children on the importance of a healthy lifestyle and diet, including local foods. Several attendees suggested the development of regional (multi-community or multi-county) health care consortiums with mobile clinics, “call-in” services to discuss minor health problems and preventative care, shared facilities for traveling physicians, and small health care facilities serving as satellites for larger regional facilities.

The role of high speed internet and its necessity for the implementation of electronic medical records and innovative telemedicine solutions was discussed at length. The attendees acknowledged that traditional methods of delivering health care are more challenging in sparsely populated rural areas and that technology offers many opportunities for providing access to specialists, preventive care, and educational services.

Attendees also discussed the need to attract and retain health care practitioners to rural areas and the challenges they faced in making that happen. Programs that offer incentives, such as scholarships and student loan repayments to providers locating in rural areas, have proven helpful in encouraging practitioners to begin their careers in rural communities. Attendees also suggested programs by which local hospitals could partner with schools and community colleges to identify young people with an aptitude and the ability to pursue medical and dental careers who also have ties to the local area. These individuals may be more interested in “coming home” to practice when they complete their training. Local hospitals or regional medical facilities could offer scholarships or loan repayment programs that would allow these students to complete necessary training on condition of working in the region.

Education

Attendees rated Adequacy of School Funding as the most serious education related issue facing their region or community, with 35 percent of attendees choosing this item (Table 12). Only attendees in Freeport rated Ability of Local Schools to Prepare Students for Jobs as the more serious issue. However, Ability of Local Schools to Prepare Students for Jobs was rated as second in importance with 28 percent rating this item critical. The Ability of Local Schools to

Prepare Students for College was rated third with 20 percent of attendees rating this item as the most serious education related issue facing their region or community. There was little variation in the responses by site.

Table 12. What are the two most serious education-related issues impacting your region or community?

	Peoria	Carbondale	Mattoon	Gibson City	Freeport	Quincy	Total	
							No.	%
Adequacy of school funding	35	23	16	42	37	31	184	35
Quality of schools	14	11	7	13	30	15	90	17
Ability of local schools to prepare students for college	17	19	8	21	26	12	103	20
Ability of local schools to train students for jobs	30	16	13	28	43	18	148	28
Totals	96	69	44	104	136	76	525	

Much of the discussion focused on the need to prepare students for the workforce. Attendees discussed the perception that vocational and technical training was not emphasized enough. Schools need to be able to collaborate more with businesses in curriculum design and given more flexibility in the way they are able to provide training. The need for more internship, apprenticeship, on-the-job and “real world” learning experiences came up often, both at the high school and college levels. At the same time, the need for basic skills, such as reading and math, and job specific skills was discussed extensively. Attendees also expressed concern about a lack of “soft skills” in the workforce and a belief that young people were not learning how to be good employees in school. The need for training in how to come to work on time and ready to work, communicate and get along with co-workers, and how to work hard was mentioned at every Listening Post site.

Infrastructure

Adequacy of Roads and Bridges was rated as the most serious infrastructure related issue impacting attendees’ region or community with 28 percent selecting that item (Table 13). Lack of Access to High Speed Internet was the second most commonly selected item with 21 percent of the attendees choosing this item. Some regional differences are apparent in the importance attached to access to high speed internet. While this item was rated the most serious issue in Peoria, Carbondale, Mattoon, and Quincy; it was rated as only fourth in seriousness in Gibson City and Freeport. Adequacy of Road and Bridges was rated as the most serious issue at these two sites, with Access to Public Transportation (rated second in Gibson City and third in Freeport) being rated as a more serious issue than internet access at both these sites. Gibson City rated Adequacy and Quality of Drinking Water as third in Gibson City. Attendees in Freeport rated Lack of Access to Rail Transportation as second in seriousness, ranking it more serious than access to internet and public transportation.

Table 13. What are the two most serious infrastructure-related issues impacting your region/community?

	Peoria	Carbondale	Mattoon	Gibson City	Freeport	Quincy	Total	
							No.	%
Lack of access to high speed internet	27	23	13	11	15	20	109	21
Adequacy and quality of drinking water	9	3	1	12	4	5	34	6
Adequacy and quality of sewage systems	13	1	4	9	7	9	43	8
Adequacy of roads and bridges	21	16	8	34	49	17	145	28
Lack of access to rail transportation	8	4	2	10	32	5	61	12
Lack of access to public transportation	16	17	10	24	24	14	105	20
Lack of proximity to an airport	2	5	5	6	5	6	29	6
Total	96	69	43	106	136	76	526	

The aging of various kinds of infrastructure was discussed extensively at the Listening Posts. Rural water and sewer systems, municipal buildings and schools, and roads and bridges are deteriorating and need to be repaired or replaced. Roads and bridges were of specific concern in the discussion. In addition, advances in technology and building standards and new state and federal regulations require upgrades and repairs to many water and sewer systems. Rural communities do not have funding in existing budgets to do the necessary improvements and there is concern that local officials do not know how to find the resources to address these needs.

The role of high speed internet as an integral part of any community or region’s infrastructure was almost universally agreed on. Attendees stated that access to high speed internet is part of the solution to many of the challenges facing rural communities. Applications that were discussed include Smart Grid, distance learning and online training, telemedicine, e-commerce, and e-government services. Attendees also discussed the important role high speed internet plays in developing collaborative regional solutions.

Volunteers and local leadership was also discussed as vital infrastructure for rural communities. Attendees recognized that their communities relied on the energy of volunteers to make things happen. Also recognized is the fact that the pool of volunteers in rural communities is aging and the number of volunteers is shrinking. Without this volunteer infrastructure in the future, rural communities will find it difficult to continue to do economic development work, provide social services, and maintain their quality of life.

Business Climate

The availability of local jobs that match the skills of residents’ education and training was selected as the most serious business climate related issue impacting their region by 22 percent of the attendees (Table 14). This was followed closely by the Cost of Compliance with Laws and Regulations with 20 percent of the attendees selecting this item. Lack of Local Job Advancement Opportunities came in third with 16 percent of the attendees selecting this issue. Overall, Availability of Business Incentives for Rural Economic Development (TIF and Enterprise Zones) was selected by only 9 percent of attendees; however, this item was rated as slightly more serious in Mattoon (14%) and Gibson City (12%). There was even less consensus about Availability of Support for Entrepreneurs with as few as 1 percent in Carbondale and as many as 14 percent in Mattoon and Quincy. Lack of Local Jobs Advancement Possibilities was also selected more often in Carbondale (30%) compared to other sites.

Table 14. What are the two most serious business climate-related issues facing your region?

	Peoria	Carbondale	Mattoon	Gibson			Total	
				City	Freeport	Quincy	No.	%
Availability of local jobs that match residents’ education / training	20	18	8	21	30	21	118	22
Availability of business incentives for rural economic development (TIF/EZs)	12	3	6	13	9	3	46	9
Cost of compliance with laws and regulations	17	12	8	31	28	12	108	20
Lack of competitive workforce	9	8	5	9	18	11	60	11
Lack of access to capital- private and public sector	17	7	4	9	17	7	61	11
Lack of local jobs advancement possibilities	12	21	6	13	24	11	87	16
Availability of support for entrepreneurs	9	1	6	10	18	11	55	10
Total	96	70	43	106	144	76	535	

Much of the discussion at the Rural Listening Posts focused on the attendees’ concern that Illinois was perceived as not friendly to business. Attendees expressed concern that many of the laws and regulations were especially burdensome for small business. Specifically, they mentioned workers’ compensation and unemployment insurance as having a negative impact on businesses. Attendees also mentioned the need for more coordination of regulatory bodies and a streamlining of some regulations to make them more “user-friendly”.

The importance of business incentives, specifically TIF districts and Enterprise Zones, was also extensively discussed. Attendees expressed concern that these are the only two tools available to rural communities to attract businesses, and that the loss of them would negatively impact economic development efforts.

Access to capital and support of entrepreneurs were also discussed as issues important to the business climate in rural areas. At the same time, attendees acknowledged the need for improved marketing of rural areas as great places to live and to do business. The need for training and technical assistance for local officials and community leaders was also discussed. Topics that are needed include supporting small businesses and entrepreneurs, making your community business friendly, marketing your community, and using technology for economic development.

Workforce

Attendees were concerned about the loss of population being experienced by rural areas. Attendees selected Skilled Population Leaving the Area (26%) and Youth Leaving Area (25%) as the two most significant barriers to a competitive workforce in their community (Table 15). Lack of Basic Skills in the Workforce came in third with 22 percent of the attendees selecting this issue. It is interesting to note that Adequacy of Work Training Opportunities in the Region was rated as most significant by only 9 percent of the attendees. There was little variation in the responses by Listening Post site.

Table 15. What are the two most significant barriers to having a competitive workforce in your community?

	Peoria	Carbondale	Mattoon	Gibson City	Freeport	Quincy	Total	
							No.	%
Lack of training for today’s jobs	18	15	9	15	27	13	97	18
Adequacy of work training opportunities in the region	13	4	3	11	6	8	45	9
Skilled population leaving the area	20	21	10	23	47	19	140	26
Youth leaving area	23	15	9	30	32	22	131	25
Lack of basic skills in the workforce	21	15	12	27	27	14	116	22
Total	95	70	43	106	139	76	529	

In the follow-up discussion, attendees called for additional or improved training and educational opportunities. Much of the discussion involved expanding the partnerships of schools, community colleges, and employers. Attendees suggested that educators need to work more closely with the business community to identify skills gaps. In addition to technology related skills, attendees identified basic skills, including literacy and math, and job readiness skills as needing improvement. Attendees discussed the value of on the job training, apprenticeships, and internships in preparing a competitive workforce.

Much discussion surrounded the perception by counselors, academic advisors, parents, and students that vocational/technical training was seen as the “second best” education path for high school and college students when compared to college prep programs. Some attendees reported that students pursuing technical training were looked down upon by their peers. A need for an awareness campaign focused on the value of this kind of training which leads to good jobs with good wages was identified.

A lack of job readiness skills was also discussed as negatively impacting the workforce. While acknowledging that this is a national issue, attendees discussed the challenge of finding enough workers with the needed technical skills, critical thinking skills, leadership skills, and motivation to fill existing vacancies. In addition, several attendees were concerned that many job applicants cannot pass drug screenings, which often are required for jobs.

Internet

Attendees were asked to select the two most significant barriers to more widespread adoption of the internet in their region. Cost of Service at 32 percent was the most commonly selected issue (Table 16). Lack of Knowledge about What the Internet Could Be Used For (24%) and Lack of Knowledge on How to Use the Internet or Computer (21%) were chosen second and third most frequently. The exception to this was the responses from the Carbondale site where only 13 percent of attendees selected Lack of Knowledge about What the Internet Could Be Used For. Attendees at this site selected Cost of Computer more often (20%).

Table 16. What are the two most significant barriers to more widespread adoption of the use of the Internet in your community?

	Peoria	Carbondale	Mattoon	Gibson City	Freeport	Quincy	Total	
							No.	%
Cost of service	26	30	13	37	36	28	170	32
Cost of computer	13	14	6	18	12	16	79	15
Lack of knowledge on how to use internet/ computer	23	12	10	22	31	13	111	21
Lack of knowledge about what the internet could be used for	24	9	12	23	44	15	127	24
Lack of interest	7	5	3	6	16	4	41	8
Total	93	70	44	106	139	76	528	

Quality of Life Revisited

We raised the quality of life issue again to get more specific feedback from respondents. When asked to select the two most significant issues impacting quality of life in their community, Lack of Good Paying Jobs was selected the most with 37 percent of attendees selecting this issue (Table 17). Second in frequency of selection was Shrinking Pool of Volunteers and Leadership at 21 percent. Inadequate Opportunities for Entertainment and Recreation and Lack of Local Options for Shopping for Goods and Services both were selected a distant third by the attendees at 13 percent. There was little variation in responses by attendance site.

Table 17. What are the two most significant issues affecting the quality of life in your community?

	Peoria	Carbondale	Mattoon	Gibson City	Freeport	Quincy	Total	
							No.	%
Lack of good paying jobs	27	27	14	36	61	28	193	37
Lack of adequate facilities and services for the elderly	4	7	3	16	2	2	34	6
Lack of local grocery store	8	1	1	2	2	2	16	3
Inadequate opportunities for entertainment and recreation	12	8	5	20	14	7	66	13
Lack of local options for shopping for goods and services	10	7	10	12	21	6	66	13
Disappearance of local institutions (schools, churches, libraries, etc.)	10	5	1	2	9	12	39	7
Shrinking pool of volunteers/leadership	23	15	10	20	29	16	113	21
Total	94	70	44	108	138	73	527	

Themes and Recommendations

As mentioned in the first section of this report, the Rural Listening Posts were one step in a process to collect information to inform the work of the Governor's Rural Affairs Council and assist it in identifying strategic and programmatic priorities. It is intended that the information gathered will enable the Council to identify gaps and unmet needs in State services. Another anticipated outcome is the identification of legislation that will advance the needs of rural communities.

Several themes emerged at the Listening Posts, both from the discussions and the electronic polling. These themes can be categorized as a Lack of Understanding and Knowledge of State Programs, a Focus on Regionalism, Local Solutions to Local Problems, Marketing of Rural Assets, and Access to High Speed Internet. A transcript of the comments made during the Rural

Listening Post discussions will be available as an appendix to the final version of this report on the Lt. Governor's website: (www.ltgov.illinois.gov).

Lack of Understanding and Knowledge of State Programs

It is apparent from the discussion at the Listening Posts that rural residents find it difficult to understand and navigate the bureaucracy of state and federal agencies. Often, attendees were unaware of programs and funding streams already in place that address the very issues they identified. For example, access to capital is an issue that arose at each of the Listening Posts. Many attendees were not aware of programs such as Advantage Illinois which was created to address this problem. Attendees were also unaware of the many workforce readiness programs offered by community colleges and workforce investment boards.

Focus on Regionalism

Attendees expressed their belief that rural areas must work together to maintain their prosperity and quality of life. Whether discussing health care, education, business climate, workforce readiness, infrastructure, or quality of life, attendees called for regional solutions and collaboration. Attendees agreed that resources were too scarce under the present economic conditions to continue to duplicate infrastructure, staffing, or funding. For example, efforts at economic development at a regional level are seen as more effective than disparate, competing efforts at the community level.

Local Solutions to Local Problems

Rural residents, as represented by the Listening Post attendees, are not looking to the state or federal agencies to create new programs to solve their problems. Instead, they see the value of working together with those services and programs that already exist and in exploiting local assets. Many of the attendees talked about the value of public/private partnerships such as those formed by many of the workforce investment boards with local community colleges and local manufacturers to identify workforce training needs and develop and deliver training programs.

Marketing of Rural Assets

The residents of rural Illinois value the quality of life available in rural places and are committed to preserving their communities and local institutions. Attendees of the Rural Listening Posts recognized that rural places can be attractive for various reasons—as bedroom communities for nearby metro areas; home to the state's colleges and universities; areas with a strong agricultural economy; areas producing green energy; hubs for small and medium manufacturing, or tourist destinations. Attendees discussed the need to do a better job in marketing rural areas as good places to live, work, and do business. They agreed that, to survive and prosper, rural places need to identify their assets and learn to exploit them. Rural leaders need assistance to identify local assets, develop a vision and brand for their community, and then exploit those assets to attract and retain residents and businesses.

Access to High Speed Internet

Access to High Speed Internet was seen as vital to the continuing prosperity of rural Illinois. High speed internet was discussed as offering solutions to enabling rural residents, businesses, and institutions to collaborate, increase efficiency, and control costs. Attendees saw affordable high speed internet as playing a key role in the future of health care, education, entrepreneurship, workforce development, access to entertainment, and connecting rural areas to the global marketplace. Along with increased access, attendees identified a need for training and models on how to best exploit high speed internet as a tool for economic development

Recommendations and Next Steps

The Listening Post process, along with the Rural Life Poll and the testimony of the GRAC Citizen Members, produced a wealth of information that will be useful to the GRAC in developing strategies and initiatives for the coming years. However, a major finding of the Listening Posts is the need for a more effective dissemination of information about existing programs and services offered by state agencies. Attendees agreed that local leaders must work together to find solutions to the issues they face. To make that possible, local leaders must have access to the best tools and best practices in community and economic development. Local leaders need to know what services are available to them and how to access them. The GRAC, through its membership is uniquely positioned to improve awareness and access to programs and services designed to serve rural Illinois

What is also apparent is that, by and large, rural residents are not looking to the state or federal governments to solve their problems by creating new programs or providing more funding. In contrast, participants in the Listening Posts more commonly expressed the desire for the state's leaders to simplify and modify policies and legislation to better serve rural areas. Attendees expressed the need for a "rural voice" that will represent their interests in policy matters. The GRAC, under the leadership of the Lt. Governor is the appropriate entity to play this role.

As stated earlier in this report, the GRAC has been involved in a year-long process of gathering data, hearing testimony from its members, and listening to rural residents. This process has resulted in following recommendation: The GRAC will form a work group to examine this information in depth and identify strategic priorities for the coming two years. Based on these priorities, the subcommittee will develop a *Vision for Rural Illinois* – a strategic vision, a set of goals, and an action plan for the Council and its member agencies. The action plan will include the following components:

- A plan for expanding awareness and access to state programs that serve rural areas;
- A report that identifies the gaps between existing programs and services and the needs expressed at the Rural Listening Posts and recommendations for addressing these gaps;
- A legislative agenda focused on rural needs and a plan for implementing such an agenda.

Appendix 1

History of Rural Listening Posts

1986: In February 1986, in light of the on-going farm crisis, Governor Thompson announces the creation of the Task Force on the Future of Rural Illinois. He appoints Lieutenant Governor George Ryan to Chair the Task Force. On March 20, the first Task Force Hearing was held in Clinton, Illinois. Over the next six months, the Task Force conducted 22 public hearings and 119 town visits to listen to rural residents.

On October 15, 1986, Governor Thompson signed executive order #6 (1986) creating the Rural Fair Share Initiative (an outgrowth of the hearings). The purpose of the Fair Share Initiative was to ensure that rural counties were receiving their fair share of state resources in the areas of infrastructure and economic development. Governor Thompson indicated that since 26% of Illinois residents lived in the 76 rural counties, that those counties should receive at least 25% of the state funding for infrastructure and economic development. The executive order mandated each agency to report annually their funding for the 76 rural counties.

Also on October 15, 1986, Governor Thompson signed executive order #7 (1986) creating the Governor's Rural Affairs Council to implement the Rural Fair Share Initiative, maintain a rural emphasis in state government, develop a statewide policy for rural development, and assist in the coordination efforts between DCCA and Ag.

In March of 1987, the work of the Task Force culminated when the official recommendations from the Task Force were submitted to the Governor and the General Assembly. The General Assembly went on to adopt the recommendations and several components of that recommendation including: enacting the Rural Diversification Act; establishing the Office of Rural Community Development, the Bureau of Ag Development, the Aquaculture Development Act, the Bed and Breakfast Tourism Program, and the Center for Value-Added Agriculture; reorganizing the Forestry Development Commission; and founding the Institute for Rural Affairs at WIU.

1997/98: A “small group of allies” of Rural Partners held a series of eight regionally sponsored meetings throughout Illinois. Input was gathered on rural issues related to leadership development, economic vitality, and quality of life. Surveys were also distributed at the 1998 Rural Community Economic Development conference. Information gathered was reported in a publication: *Building a Brighter Future for Rural Illinois: Goals for Stronger Communities*.

2000: A series of six regional hearings were held throughout the state. Participants were asked to rate the importance of 23 local issues including health care, economic development, education, child care, elderly care, housing, and infrastructure. The information gathered was used to develop a statewide plan: *Charting a Course for the New Millennium*.

2007: Rural Partners held four regional Discussion Forums. Public comments were gathered on the following issues: leadership development, economic vitality, quality of life, and homeland security. A survey on rural issues and perceptions on quality of life was also distributed at these meetings and the annual Rural Community Economic Development Conference.

Appendix 2

Discussion Notes from the Rural Listening Posts

Appendix 2 will be available in the final version of this report on the Lt. Governor's website.
(www.ltgov.illinois.gov)