



# 2017 Rural Counts Advocacy Priorities

The Rural Center's advocacy platform, *Rural Counts: 10 Strategies for Rural North Carolina's Future*, presents a framework for creating a stronger rural economy in the context of a rapidly changing state. We will focus our efforts in 2017 on tracking and influencing several broad issue areas that cut across the 10 *Rural Counts* strategies. These cross-cutting issue areas include:

1. Supporting Hurricane Matthew long-term economic recovery packages at the federal and state levels and actively engaging in long-term economic recovery work.
2. Influencing anticipated legislative revision of the state's economic tier system.
3. Ensuring that efforts to meet infrastructure needs address rural priorities.
4. Contributing to bipartisan efforts to enhance rural-urban connections and to adopt a flexible approach to statewide economic development policy that works for all.

While we will track all legislative issues of rural significance, we will focus our advocacy efforts around the following priorities within the *Rural Counts* framework:

## Vigorously Advocate for Innovation in Education and Workforce Development

- Support the use of federal and state workforce development resources to fully embrace entrepreneurship as a core workforce development strategy.
- Support the expansion of rural community colleges' role in addressing economic development priorities in chronically distressed regions.
- Support collaboration among K-12, community college and university systems.

## Stabilize and Transform Rural Health

- Support state and federal efforts to address rural opioid/heroin addiction.
- Support efforts of the National Governors' Association, Rural Health Association and others to address practitioner shortages in rural communities.
- Monitor and influence any likely federal and state changes to the Affordable Care Act to assure that rural people become healthier and rural hospitals are more financially sound.

## Expand Accessible, Affordable High-Speed Fiber Broadband

- Advocate for raising the speed standard for federal investments in rural broadband.
- Support a compromise position on the reasonable expansion of municipal broadband.
- Support a state-level grants program to better leverage federal & private funding.

## Accelerate Modernization of Essential Rural Water and Wastewater Infrastructure

- Support the priorities identified in "*North Carolina's Water and Wastewater Infrastructure Master Plan.*"
- Monitor deployment of the Connect NC Bonds for water and sewer improvements.

## **Expand and Upgrade Transportation and Natural Gas Infrastructure**

- Support administrative and/or legislative refinement of the State Transportation Improvement Plan (STIP) formulas, especially for statewide projects, to provide improved funding for rural projects with statewide impact.
- Monitor and seek to shape efforts to expand statewide transportation funds through all potential mechanisms.
- Support establishment of rural-specific statewide representation on the STIP Workgroup.

## **Invest in Stronger Entrepreneurship and Small Business Development Systems**

- Support the increased allocation of state funds to make retention and entrepreneurship strategies on par with recruitment in statewide economic development efforts.
- Support expansion and increased visibility for a one-stop shop for small businesses (e.g., Business Link NC).
- Support commissioning of statewide research to evaluate local economic development programs and to make recommendations to strengthen their effectiveness.

## **Strengthen Homegrown Manufacturing**

- Support establishing a private sector manufacturing council to create a focused state strategy for advanced manufacturing.
- Support additional investment in apprenticeships and other on-site training efforts for priority manufacturing sectors.

## **Develop Opportunities for Agriculture and Natural Resources**

- Support continued implementation of the food manufacturing taskforce recommendations, including prioritized funding for regional projects.
- Support efforts to increase food manufacturing and biotechnology business opportunities.
- Support efforts to increase entry of youth and young adults into farming and other natural resource businesses.
- Support regional food networks that reinforce rural and urban economic connections.

## **Enhance Regional Collaboration and Partnerships**

- Actively engage in promoting improved regional collaboration, including convening discussions around enhancing rural-urban connections.
- Support executive branch initiatives, legislative proposals, and corporate/philanthropic efforts that invest in and strengthen regional organizations, collaborations, and partnerships.
- Convene regional economic development stakeholders and civic leaders in the Northeast and Southeast regions of North Carolina to address coordinated strategies to counter chronic underdevelopment.

## **Stabilize and Leverage Rural Development Funding and Technical Assistance**

- Support increased federal and state support for technical resources, capacity building, and planning services aimed at the local and regional level, especially for North Carolina's economically distressed regions.
- Support efforts to accelerate rural community philanthropy in support of local, regional, and statewide economic development initiatives aligned with the Rural Counts platform.