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Local News

Panelist: Rural America must 'have an opinion, become active'

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GRANT - Rural America will survive only by empowering residents to save themselves, according to four panelists speaking during a teleconferencing seminar last week. The seminar focused on rural leadership and rural policy issues.

The Perkins County High School in Grant was one of nine sites across the state to host the seminar sponsored by the University of Nebraska's Public Policy Center.

The forum was designed to encourage Nebraskans to participate in local politics and recruit community members in the public process, said Bill Kelly, executive news producer for NET Television and moderator of Wednesday's conference.

Those serving on the panel for the seminar were Nebraska Senator Ray Aguilar of Grand Island; Richard Foster, vice president for programs at the W.K Kellogg Foundation; Chancellor Doug Kristensen of the University of Nebraska-Kearney; and Sandy Scofield, director of the Nebraska Rural Initiative at the University of Nebraska.

"There is a lack of a collective voice in rural America," Kristensen said. "Citizens need to go back to their rural communities and look at their assets and from there empower one another."

Kristensen went on to say rural America must "have an opinion and become active."

Scofield echoed a similar opinion, saying where the loudest voice is heard, is where the government's attention will be directed.

"If enough constituents come together as a unified voice, then the (government's) money is going to go there. It is more difficult for rural communities to develop such a voice than it is for urban communities, but it can be done," she said.

This unification can only be done through leadership, Kristensen said.

"Leadership is a fundamental issue," he said. "We need to focus on developing quality leaders." When government dollars are awarded to a rural community, it should be the rural communities' responsibility and role to administer it, Foster said. Local residents know best how to develop the best outcome for the invested dollars, he said.

A community's diversification is also important to rural survival, Foster said.

"There is no silver bullet when it comes to knowing where to put your economic development dollars, and in my opinion, I don't think tourism is the No. 1 answer," Foster said. There just aren't a lot of government funds available to assist with rural development, Aguilar

said.

"The state doesn't have a large pot of money to give, but it does have incentives to help lighten the load, and increase opportunities for businesses," Aguilar said.

The panel also discussed the issues of bringing skills and resources to farmers and ranchers through local community colleges and the University's Extension programs.

"Extension educators are, I believe, underutilizing technology to deliver classes directly to producers' homes," Scofield said.

Foster also agreed, saying it was time to "repackage" how the extension decided upon and delivered its programs.

"The extension has not outlived its usefulness, but it needs to listen to what its consumers need," Foster said.

The panel said it was important for individual rural counties to work together by creating more inter-local agreements to save dollars, Kristensen said.

"We need to take down the barriers and differences and come together for the common good," Kristensen said.

Foster said that although difficult, saving rural America must be accomplished.

"Rural America is a national treasure, and if it is lost, it will be very difficult to attain again," he said. "We need local champions to make rural issues heard."

The University of Nebraska Public Policy Center provides assistance to policymakers and researchers on a wide range of public policy issues. The Center works with policymakers in all three branches of government at local, state, and federal levels. As a system-wide Policy Center, staff works with University researchers from all campuses of the University of Nebraska system.

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