

Terry B. Reilly Memorial Lecture Keynote

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**“The Role of Community in the Great Rural Renaissance:  
Addressing the Difficult Questions”**

Thank you, Denny.

It is an honor to be with you today, first of all, to again lift up and honor the transformative work of Terry Reilly. It is so very fitting that NRHA's Memorial Lecture is named for one who truly altered the fortunes of a place, and its people, for the better—a living reminder that community does, indeed, matter.

As all of you know, NRHA is one of my favorite rural organizations—a role model for all others. Beth, Denny, Keith, and others have raised the issue of community very effectively within NRHA, and it is a critical question for NRHA today. I shall return to that focus shortly. NRHA is also one of my favorite organizations because of the tremendous leadership Alan Morgan, all of your staff, and your elected leadership provide the broader rural community in national policy matters. You are a wonderful “community of the committed”!

This is the second time I have been given the honor of presenting this address, so I began wondering why. There are several possibilities:

1. I am so old, and the first address was so utterly unmemorable, that no one recognized! Or,
2. NRHA wants me to keep doing this, until I get it right! Or,
3. There's so many critical sessions here, given health reform, that NRHA staff decided to build a “soft spot,” to rest your brains, nerves, and energies.

In any case, sit back, relax—you will miss nothing if you even snooze a bit, I am here to serve—as I think out loud a while regarding community, rural policy, and the potential for The Great Rural Renaissance.

In preparing for this assignment I reviewed comments made by others who were honored to give this address in the past. On May 17, 1990, C. Everett Koop challenged NRHA with the following words, during his address:

*“NRHA has a very rich history, indeed, with a clear trend of diversification to include all concerned groups... But the point is that you have achieved a diversity that mirrors the rural America for which you are advocates. The coalition you have built cuts across more narrowly-focused institutional and professional interests...”*

*“How can you best serve rural America? So often, mature movements perpetuate self-serving policies and forget that it is not themselves, but a constituency that must be served. Clearly you have done a great deal to focus attention on the health needs of the rural population. Your continuing leadership task is to formulate and reformulate a collective vision for the health of rural America.”*

I could not agree more with his charge to NRHA.

## **Community Matters!**

“Community Matters”—what a great double entendre. Today, I’d like to discuss the economic, social, political, and policy contexts for considering “community”:

1. In a rural dimension;
2. In relation to what The Brookings Institution characterizes as “The Metropolitan Nation”;
3. And, finally, from a NRHA organizational standpoint.

Then, I would like to frame these considerations within a larger rural dynamic, what I would call “The Great Rural Renaissance.” We are, indeed, either on the cusp of a great rural reawakening, or in the final death throes of the rural agrarian vision. This is the ultimate tipping point for rural America, and I shall argue that the positive alternative remains possible, but only if rural advocates unite across sectors to achieve that outcome.

In closing, I’ll offer some thoughts on the role NRHA can and should play in the ensuing national dialogue regarding these possibilities.

## **A Personal Perspective on the Question**

I have chosen to approach this consideration from a decidedly personal perspective, because I am among friends, whom I trust and value, and because it explains, better than anything, why I am so strongly committed to this perspective. Plus, it’s actually a rather good story.

I assume I am with you today, for the second time in this role, for at least three reasons:

1. The first I’ve already mentioned—my deep appreciation for all of you, and the key role NRHA plays in broader rural policy concerns;
2. Secondly, my long-time efforts to alleviate rural poverty, by way of public policy change;
3. Lastly, because my efforts are grounded in my theological training and Christian faith. (*When one spends a lifetime working for rural people in the policy arena, prayer becomes increasingly relevant!*)

So, since I will be speaking from the heart today, I thought it might be well, so as to validate my voice and vision, to share what is in my heart, and what has formed it. For this is all deeply grounded in community.

I grew up in Appalachian Ohio, and had a blessed upbringing. Our family was quite wealthy, in actuality, as I came to learn over the course of my life, just not by material standards. Smithfield, Ohio was a mining and farming community—diverse, inclusive, caring, and creative, a truly special place. I was raised on a small dairy farm, and had an uneventful farming childhood until the eleventh year of my life, when three critical events occurred, which forever formed my path. Three epiphanies, in one year—how special!

In the spring of that year, after my grandfather had plowed the family garden plot with our team, Kate and George, he moved beyond the apple orchard where the garden was located, stopped the team, and called me over. He said, “Butchie,” [How’s that for a nickname!] “take ‘em on out toward the Kithcart place, and bring ‘em back—let’s get this cornfield opened up.” This, of course, was the highlight of my young life until that time. I was being initiated into the fellowship of the soil, and had longed for this moment. Until then, I had worked the horses behind my grandfather, or on his lap, but had never done so alone. Naturally, Kate and George knew about all this, and could have plowed this field in their sleep. However, I didn’t know that back then, and this represented both my most monumental challenge and my greatest

farming opportunity. Without a doubt, that day I was responsible for the most crooked furrow ever plowed on the Foster Farm, but it looked perfect to me!

After we had gone out and come back, my grandfather thanked me for “openin’ it up,” and took over again, and I sat down under a huge old apple tree, in the full blossom of that Appalachian spring, to savor the moment. I watched him take the horses out again to the west, in hindsight, repairing my damage! As I sat there, I looked to the east, past our orchard, across the valley below and up above our woods, to the village. At that point, I had an overwhelming realization that my life was perfect. I knew and loved my place, my role on the farm and my future possibilities. I realized how truly blessed I was. This feeling was palpable, and I shall never forget that inner joy.

Later that summer, I left home for the first time, to spend a week at a Boy Scout camp on a lake in eastern Ohio. All went quite well there for a few days, and I was adjusting to being away from my home community and family, until a handicraft session, when one of the Eagle Scouts in charge looked at me and said, “That’s the ugliest birthmark I have ever seen!” Now, that was tough, and I left shortly thereafter, quietly stealing away to return to my tent. After a while, I realized this was so troubling because it had never occurred before, and I had never needed to deal with it. Clearly, I had always looked this way. But, until then, no one had ever mentioned it, because it hadn’t mattered to them. As I reflected upon this, I realized how very important family and community are in forming our sense of self and the world, either for good or ill. Our community had nurtured me well!

Later that fall, as I came home one day on the school bus, I noticed that our fences were torn down and our cows were out. I soon learned why. Early that morning, the coal company had come onto our land with bulldozers and began to mine what had been, until then, a pristine valley. As my family discussed this with me, I learned that years before a prior owner had signed away forever the surface rights to our farm, for a pittance—via the Broad Form Deed, a common Appalachian tragedy. In two days, the blasting began, and all of the 23 springs on our farm were gone. My grandfather was forced to sell his dairy cows that Friday at the Scio Auction. The rest was history. Over the next six months, I lay in bed each night and listened to the coal shovel destroying the hollows of our farm. Since this occurred before federal or state reclamation laws, still today three sides of our seventh-generation family farm are scarred with a 150-foot vertical high-wall.

This was a very difficult time for our family, but it taught me about institutional complicity in greed, that money is a powerful force for evil, as well as good, and that even our little, isolated Appalachian community was not immune from global economic forces. Today, our county remains one of the most heavily strip-mined counties in the U.S.

My lifelong commitment to social and economic justice began as I lay in the bedroom of that farm house each night, listening to our farm, and the future I envisioned for myself, being destroyed. That is also when my commitment to public policy was birthed. I learned three valuable lessons in my eleventh year—community truly matters, forces beyond community influence its ultimate destiny, and public policy can affect these two realities, for the good. And, so, my approach to this “community” consideration is framed from my place, to which I will return next week, to again plow the same garden plot my grandfather and I plowed in my eleventh year.

I am choosing to skirt the subtle nuances and effete intellectual considerations of the “community” question today: *Gemeinschaft*, *gesellshaft*; all the community “capitals”; communitarianism, *Bowling Alone*. By the way, who actually enjoys bowling alone, anyway?; sense of community/community ecology/community development/community currencies; and communities of geography, culture, identity, and affinity. These are all conceptually significant, important topics, and others much more deeply versed in this literature than I should be turned to on these questions. I am choosing to set aside

sociology, cultural and social anthropology, social philosophy, and archeology today, ...

And call on the poet Wendell Berry.....

On October 14, 2009 he was interviewed at the Wisconsin Book Fair, and asked by the moderator about newly-emerging forms of community, digital communities, etc., “Are these credible forms of community?”

Wendell responded, “We are flooded with language, but we must be very careful. All I ask is that you recognize you’re using a metaphor!” And then he added, “Aldo Leopold said it best: ‘A community is the people and the place and everything else that’s in it!’” As Wendell has said elsewhere, “What I stand for is what I stand on! ..... The past is our definition. We may strive, with good reason, to escape it, or to escape what is bad in it, but we will escape it only by adding something better to it ..... A community is the mental and spiritual condition of knowing that the place is shared, and that the people who share the place define and limit the possibilities of each other’s lives. It is the knowledge that people have of each other, their concern for each other, their trust in each other, the freedom with which they come and go among themselves.”

That sums it up for me. So, that definition of community will be my referent for the rest of my thoughts this afternoon—*communitas*—gifts together!

### **The “Rural” Challenge in “Rural Community”**

Having identified this framework for community, we next must address the “rural” challenge in the “rural community” consideration. A few quick groundings are in order:

1. All rural communities are not agriculturally-based. In fact, most are not.
2. All rural communities are not suffering. Many are, but many are not.
3. However, most of our nation’s persistent poverty counties are rural, and in our most disadvantaged rural communities, the indicators of need are equal to or greater than those experienced in our central cities.
4. Some rural communities will be most sustainable, if “developed” from an economic standpoint, not much further.
5. Many rural communities are in metropolitan areas.

Let’s explore these dynamics briefly. U.S. definitions of rural are imprecise. OMB designations of Core Based Statistical Areas are based on urban centers and the commuting relationship with those centers. ‘Metropolitan’ does not equate with ‘urban,’ and ‘non-metropolitan’ doesn’t equate with ‘rural.’ In fact, given these definitions, 51% of rural people live in metropolitan counties. Thus, precise definitions of rural and urban never work well for policy targeting, as you know. It is difficult to find a common middle ground that describes the continuum. In fact, the most “rural” states only account for under 7% of the rural population (Vermont, 62%; Maine, 60%; West Virginia, 54%; Mississippi, 51%; South Dakota, 48%). Furthermore, five states that usually are viewed as urban account for over 25% of our nation’s rural people (Texas, 3.6 million; North Carolina, 3.2 mil.; Pennsylvania, 2.8 mil.; Ohio, 2.5 mil.; Michigan, 2.5 mil.). Additionally, nonmetropolitan America includes many urban centers. 60% of nonmetropolitan residents live in micropolitan areas, which include a regional center of 10,000 to 49,999 people. These urban clusters are logical hubs for the emergence of regional innovation strategies, encompassing workforce, ecosystem, health & human services, and retail service infrastructures.

While “rural” is generally regarded as the appropriate construct for targeting public policies toward non-metropolitan communities in the U.S., we are unclear as to what “rural” truly is. There are many different

perspectives. For some, “rural” is an idealized perception, typology, or memory, real or imagined. For others, it is what is not “something else”—urban or metropolitan. For some, it is described as a state of mind, or psycho-social identity. And for others, a cultural, ethnic, geographical, or class identity.

In practice, from a policy standpoint, “rural” is a non-specific, changeable and imprecise composite of a discrete set of variables, differing across federal and state policy and programs, and time, which is used to target specific funding sources. This is not a policy goal, this is an administrative construct. As I have long stated, “Once you have seen rural community...., you have, indeed, seen just one rural community!” A far more granular understanding is essential, for our nation contains many different, and quite unique “rurals.”

Furthermore, policy arguments regarding the question of what is “rural” deflect attention from a far more critical question, and federal policy failure—the lack of a stated policy goal for federal investments in nonmetropolitan geographies. In Europe, there is a strong public policy commitment to a “Livable Countryside.” That “Livable Countryside” construct, which includes small urban centers, rural communities, small villages, and farms and natural resource areas, provides such a consensus vision, through the principles which underlie the construct. Until recently, no such approach was possible here. But the Obama Administration has provided a new possibility.

### **The Obama Administration’s “Place-Based” Policy Agenda**

This lack of a stated rural policy goal is exacerbated today by a newly-minted rural/urban dissonance. This emanates from the Obama Administration’s “Place-Based” policy agenda, the emerging Livable Communities Partnership between HUD, DOT, Commerce, and EPA, the “Livable Cities” Movement, and The Brookings Institution’s Metropolitan Policy Center agenda.

It is important that we unpack all this a bit, for it will have a huge impact upon the future of our nation’s rural communities. Rural policy scholars have argued for a place-based domestic policy agenda for the last half-century, recognizing the differential disadvantage in community capacity under which rural regions struggle. As many of you know, U.S. social welfare policy has long contained a tension between investments in people or in places. While many of us felt this was always a false dichotomy, since community and culture are inextricably linked to individual and family decisions and outcomes, it did hold sway for some time, as federal place investments were felt to simply institutionalize poverty. There was, of course, substantial evidence to support this view, from a decidedly urban perspective. However, in other nations, including the EU, Canada, and many developed nations within the OECD, place-based investments have long been viewed as the ideal framework in which to integrate federal commitments to rural geographies.

All this is currently being stood on its head by the Obama Administration. The White House released a significant Memorandum for the Heads of Executive Departments and Agencies on August 11, 2009, creating a new framework for place-based policies, beginning with the FY ‘11 federal budget. This guidance memorandum outlined new policy principles to advance the Administration’s domestic and fiscal priorities, and to increase the impact of federal funding by leveraging place-conscious and place-based programming. This first public acknowledgement was presaged by significant developmental work on the part of The Brookings Metropolitan Policy Center over the last two years. Bruce Katz, Mark Muro, and other colleagues at Brookings are my friends, and their commitment to this new framework for urban policy design is widely acknowledged to be appropriate and innovative. However, beyond this point, there are dragons! If place-based policy is to be the Administration’s new domestic policy framework, how do small urban and rural communities and the countryside fare? Will this ultimately be only a metropolitan agenda? Or can the rural-urban continuum be acknowledged, and regional efforts to link and advantage diverse rural communities be built?

This White House memo asked for specific actions from each federal department, including the identification of three to five major programs, before OMB budget submission, designed to address the principles of place policy, which include:

- Clear, measurable, and carefully-evaluated goals which guide investment and regulation in economic competitiveness, environmental sustainability, community health and access to opportunity, safety, and security;
- An acknowledgement that change occurs through the community level, and often through partnership, and that complex problems require flexible, integrated solutions; and
- An acknowledgement that many important challenges demand regional approaches.

Since that time, all federal departments have begun framing new program design, in response to this White House Directive, and competitive federal grants to incentivize regional innovation efforts have been developed. There has been a significant response to these funding opportunities.

Unfortunately, a place-based policy framework which focuses solely on metropolitan geography masks a number of critical realities. First of all, metropolitan areas do account for over 80% of our total population, and much of our nation's economic activity. However, they only account for 25% of our nation's land mass, while most of our nation's food, energy, and natural resource activities occur beyond metropolitan borders. Consequently, a metropolitan focus for place-based investments ignores critical linkages with three-quarters of our U.S. natural resource base, and the 20% of the population which stewards those national treasures.

Advocates for this place-based policy are currently engaged in a re-calibration, to better address the actual rural-urban continuum in all regional innovation practices. I remain hopeful that this re-thinking will result in meaningful attention to the unique rural contributions to our nation's metropolitan areas, including the air we breathe, the food we eat, the natural resources which sustain both, and the cultural heritage and environmental assets which frame the basis for much of urban America's recreational and cultural pursuits.

This is the ultimate question: Can rural America participate in this place-based policy awakening, and could it become the vehicle for an emerging Great Rural Renaissance, across the American landscape?

### **The Great Rural Renaissance**

I would argue we are, in fact, in the midst of a major new rural innovation, which will offer tremendous advantage to rural people and places, over time, if we can but capture and actualize it. These are the main reasons, among others, I believe this to be the case:

1. A new societal concern for natural resource stewardship.
2. New commitments to bio-energy and renewable energy.
3. The ARRA-funded rural broadband deployment.
4. The slow, community and regional foods movements, or, more precisely, the fact that California and New York now care a great deal about where their food comes from!
5. The emerging inter-generational wealth transfer which will occur over the next twenty years, and the psychic link boomers raised in rural America feel toward their communities of childhood.

6. The congealing possibilities for this mature rural diaspora.
7. The amazing equity which resides in the rural countryside, 90% debt-free.
8. The tremendous entrepreneurship culture within our nation's rural immigrant communities.
9. The strong leadership of rural women, in all sectors.
10. USDA Secretary Tom Vilsack, and his new vision for Regional Rural Innovation, as well as the fact HHS Secretary Kathleen Sebelius and he were both rural governors, and understand the importance of rural communities and the uniqueness of their opportunities, as well as challenges.
11. The fact that rural seniority still controls the pursestrings of many Congressional Appropriations Committees, where urban place-based programs must find their federal funding.
12. National organizations such as NRHA, which could become truly united and engaged in seeking a national Rural Regional Innovation framework.
13. Health care reform, which when finally implemented will enable the rural uninsured to gain access to quality, affordable health care.

Building a new commitment to rural America, via a federal place-based approach, offers huge opportunities. However, achieving this Regional Rural Innovation framework will demand:

1. Greater attention to asset-based development, much more broadly defined.
2. The building of regional frameworks, appropriately configured, and of sufficient scale to leverage these geographies and bridge these constituencies. This does not mean rural communities are not important, but it does mean they must collaborate to achieve competitive scale and advantage. (While we need rural and urban regional responses, their intersection is the future of enlightened place-based policy.)
3. As the federal role reduces over time, and as state and local fiscal challenges exacerbate, greater attention must be given to new governance/new intermediary support by the public sector.
4. Regional innovation policies which specifically target mutually-beneficial competitive advantages which rural and urban areas share (i.e., regional food systems, bio-energy compacts, natural resource-based/sustainability assets, "work-shed"/"water-shed" approaches/etc.).
5. Attention to the importance of working landscapes, through arts/heritage/culture; natural resources/tourism; and bio-energy, bio-fuels, and entrepreneurial agriculture.
6. Incentives to bridge innovation/entrepreneurship support systems, across the urban-rural continuum.
7. Opportunities to address spatial mismatch issues in workforce/training across broader geographies, via "place-based" community/technical college collaborations, to both sister schools and research universities.
8. Innovative funding approaches which enhance collaboration across state and local governments, particularly in cross-sectoral, regional experimentation.

9. Continuing commitments to rural infrastructure deployment, including, but not limited to broadband.

As if all this were not daunting enough, there are a deeper set of critical institutional challenges facing each sector in rural America. Frankly, the rural health sector, with great thanks to NRHA, is in the forefront of this renaissance. However, if rural America is to participate in this regional innovation framework, we must rethink core missions; redefine roles and responsibilities; create a renaissanced leadership cadre, who become change agents; engage and support the “border crossers”; and redefine “we” and “they,” with special attention to diversity, cultural, and social inclusion.

In a rural setting, these innovations will often require investments in new intermediaries, which become more critical than ever. This recession and the lagging rural economic recovery which will only slowly occur, will be particularly challenging next year, when federal ARRA funds are depleted. State and local governments are already operating under historic budget deficits, which will probably increase before they decline in rural America. At the same time, safety net funding is in crisis, as local and state revenues decline and human services need expands exponentially. Unfortunately, in the midst of these challenges, the comity within our public discourse and the tempering center of our body politic both continue to erode. Rural organizations such as NRHA, whose members are the leaders who drive rural America, need to support these new approaches, in a meaningful and committed manner.

### **The NRHA Challenge**

Finally, what of this “community”—NRHA? What should NRHA be doing, to specifically support such a Rural Renaissance? NRHA has long been acknowledged as a rural organizational leader. While you will be tremendously challenged by the sectoral demands of health reform, I would argue that the rural health community must lead the nation in addressing these new rural realities. If you agree with this assessment, the poet Goethe frames the demand:

“It is not enough to know,  
One should also use;  
“It is not enough to want,  
One should also act.”

These are powerful words of institutional challenge. The rural health sector represents the broad leadership cadre of most rural communities. Urban America is very well-positioned to assume the leadership mantle for the federal place-based policy agenda. Organizations such as NRHA must assume responsibility for assuring that rural people and communities are also equitably advantaged. This is especially true, given the continuing challenges of the most disadvantaged among our rural citizens. We simply do not have the luxury of picking a less difficult time. The time is now.

Charles Darwin once observed, “If the misery of the poor be caused not by the laws of nature, but by our institutions, great is our sin.” As Surgeon General Koop challenged NRHA twenty years ago, I ask a similar question: Is one of our nation’s leading rural organizations doing all it can to lead a “community of the committed,” despite all you must deal with at this time, to ensure rural America is not left behind by the metropolitan place-based focus? This is a daunting question.....

In closing, let me suggest a more fascinating double entendre than “Community Matters.” It is NRHA. As the National Association for “Rural Health,” could you provide greater leadership, with your vast organizational influence, to suggest that all members and sub-sector leaders also commit to leading a new national effort to assure a “Livable Countryside,” as well as “Livable Cities”? This is not a passing intellectual curiosity. It is a deep, challenging conundrum during a time of massive change in your sector.

But it is my belief that all of you, who have done so very much to build the political power of this association's entities, and thereby their viability and sustainability economically, are also called upon today to offer that very same commitment for a renewed rural policy leadership, through and beyond your sector, to achieve a "Rural Health" across the American landscape. As the Surgeon General challenged twenty years ago, "your continuing leadership task is to formulate and reformulate a collective vision for the health of rural America."

As Emerson once observed, "What lies behind us, and what lies before us, are tiny matters compared to what lies within us." You are a wonderful "community"! NRHA has a phenomenal history of service to rural America. However, I would argue your greatest moment may be before you. I look forward to working with you to ensure that Regional Rural Innovation becomes central to our nation's new U.S. place-based policy.

Thank you for your continuing friendship and leadership. Rural America awaits your decision.