



**The Brookings Institution  
Reimagine Rural podcast**

**“A visit to Washington, DC: The state of federal rural policy”**

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*Episode Summary:*

In this episode of “Reimagine Rural,” Tony Pipa speaks with key officials from the executive branch serving rural America. They discuss the current state of rural policy, its origins, and a blueprint for the future. We also hear from past and future guests about their needs and their recommendations for the federal government.

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**TORRES SMALL** We've been talking a lot about the diversity of rural America and how there is no one size fits all solution. And that's clear because from the Midwest to the Black Belt to Indian Country to Alaska native villages, there is so much diversity that goes unseen across rural America.

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But in this work and in my travels, the common thing that I've seen is a real love for home. A pride in the place that they live. And a determination to make sure it's a place that their kids can grow up and thrive and can choose to stay as adults in. And that sense of innovation about how do they continue to invest in that place they love.

**PIPA:** That's the undersecretary for rural development at the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Xochitl Torres Small, describing what she sees as the essence of what rural towns hold in common across America: A love for home. Unseen diversity. Pride of place. Innovation.

I'm Tony Pipa, a senior fellow in the Center for Sustainable Development at the Brookings Institution, and in this episode of Reimagine Rural, I'm making a detour from my travels in rural America to make a stop in Washington D.C., where I talk with the undersecretary and other senior officials in the U.S. government about supporting places like Shamokin, Pennsylvania, and Globe, Arizona, who you've already heard about, as well as other rural places I'll visit in upcoming episodes.

Usually on the podcast I talk to local people telling the stories of their communities and how they are making progress on their efforts to thrive and prosper amid economic and social change, but today I'm going to work out a bit. Today I'm going to be taking a tour ... through the federal government! Yeah, I know what most of you are thinking: this will be new territory indeed.

It's a chance to start answering a question that has been top of mind as I talk to local people across rural America: How do we as a country help unleash the innovation in and strengthen the resilience of these places? Okay, that sounds a little lofty. More practically, then: where do these communities find the investment they need to help solve their local problems and reach the vision they have for the future of their community? And, how effective are we being in supporting them?

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My first stop was Undersecretary Torres-Small. After all, she leads a division of USDA actually named "Rural Development," or USDA-RD for short. She comes by her rural credentials honestly.

**TORRES SMALL** For me, before this, my job was a United States representative, representing New Mexico's 2nd congressional district. And it was the largest district that was in its own state. So, it was a lot of miles, a lot of dirt roads, and a lot of rural people and places. And I loved that because I know firsthand the opportunities that can come from rural places. My grandparents immigrated from Mexico to pick cotton, and they settled in the

Murcia Valley, which is where I grew up. And so because of their hard work, I had the chance to get to grow up in Las Cruces and then ultimately represent that district.

Growing up, I also spent time on my aunt and uncle's ranch in Colorado in a town where we could only get two radio stations. And of course, they're both country. And there was one general store and a post office. So, I know how special those places are, getting to work on the ranch, just knowing the sacrifice that comes to be in the place that you love, and the work that's done that supports the whole country. And I decided that I wanted to work to support those people and those places.

**PIPA:** To understand today's rural policy, it's good to start with its history. USDA-RD is a legacy of some of the most successful programs ever associated with the federal government. Back in the early 20th century, as a country we decided to invest in rural America to make sure it stayed connected to the rest of the economy as we entered the industrial era, even amid the growing urbanization and technological changes that came with it. For the most part, it worked, though it's important to acknowledge that some of those programs discriminated and disadvantaged Native American, Black, and Latino rural communities.

**TORRES SMALL** Rural development's soul, or its roots, is probably grounded in the Rural Electrification Act where people decided that no matter where you lived, you should be able to have light at night. And so, there were enormous efforts to make sure that electricity was taken all across the country. From that, we also invested in terms of the Rural Utilities Service in making sure people had access to good drinking water and a safe way to flush your toilet. And although enormous strides have been made in that, even as we delve into new utilities and modern day necessities like high speed internet, we also have to reckon with the fact that there are still places in Indian Country and Alaska, in the Black Belt, that don't have those basic needs like water and wastewater or electricity.

**PIPA:** So, one thing I think it's important to note here: the Rural Electrification Act was enacted in 1936 during the Franklin D. Roosevelt administration. So, this was almost a century ago.

**TORRES SMALL** So, the other things that rural development does is invest in affordable housing. It's a huge challenge, even before COVID-19, making sure that people have a safe place to live in rural America. Often people think about housing pressures in cities, but the expense to get building materials all the way out to rural places, the workforce to build homes, and just the age of homes that exist all across rural America makes affordable housing a real challenge for people who are working to provide the basic necessities for all Americans—you know, food, fiber, fuel. So, we invest in housing for some people with some of the lowest incomes.

The last agency is the Rural Business and Cooperative Service, which invests in businesses in rural places, recognizing that in order for rural places that support all of America to thrive, they've got to have thriving markets and better and stronger markets. And so, that's investing in loans for those small businesses. It's investing in energy efficiency, say for a rural grocery store so they can both improve their bottom line but also be part of climate resiliency. And also supporting farmers to take product and earn more from it through our value added producer grant.

**PIPA:** The Rural Housing Act was in 1949, and the Consolidated Farm and Rural Development Act was enacted in 1961. Together these programs were really successful in bringing rural places into the modern era.

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As a result, rural America supplied many of the inputs that made the American economy strong: food, power, fiber, timber.

However, these programs were also created in a different time and when the economy was very different. It raises the question of how they might need to change, or whether we need new tools for the shifts that rural communities are facing today.

The rural economy itself has really changed. While agriculture, for example, is still very important to some communities, today it makes up only 7% of overall rural employment. Services, manufacturing, retail—all these are larger slices of the rural economy.

Some people even suggestion that it's a misnomer today to have the Department of Agriculture in charged with rural development. I'm going to steer clear of that controversy.

Given its legacy and its current set-up, USDA-RD does have certain strengths when it comes to serving rural America.

**TORRES SMALL** It does a lot. I think sometimes people think of it as a Swiss Army knife. There's a whole lot of tools. There's actually about 50 programs, give or take one or two depending on how Congress feels that year. And the thing that distinguishes it in terms of work that the federal government does is that Rural Development has a unique rural mandate to serve places across rural America. And that focus builds expertise in terms of our team. We have over 4,600 employees, over 450 offices, and people living in the rural places that they serve.

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That provides a real perspective, a real sense of pride in the work they do, and a real expertise when it comes to how to be the right kind of partner to people across rural America.

**PIPA:** So, USDA-RD has a mission that is focused on rural America. It has staff who live in rural places across the country. This gives them unique capabilities. Yet those 50 programs are only a portion of the possible investment choices for rural communities.

In fact, there are more than 400 programs spread across every nook and cranny of the federal government available to rural places for their community and economic development.

Here, for example, is Alejandra Castillo, the assistant secretary for the Economic Development Administration, or EDA, which is part of the Department of Commerce. They have programs that work with rural communities too.

**CASTILLO:** EDA is one of 13 different bureaus at the Department of Commerce, but it is the only federal agency that really focuses on economic development. I like to say that EDA invests in what communities see and what they don't see. And let me tell you what that means. That means that not only do we make investments in the infrastructure, water and sewage pipeline—that's our public works side—but we also invest in creating the ecosystem

where we can support communities both in their economic development planning and their strategies through our comprehensive economic development strategy, which is called CEDs.

But we also create the conditions, we work with communities to create those conditions to help them grow and thrive. And I'll say everything from building an entrepreneurship incubator to maybe just also providing greater capacity in working with communities large and small to be able to leverage resources throughout the federal government, or at a minimum, be able to ignite economic opportunities, travel and tourism, and agriculture in and in so many different facets.

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**PIPA:** I also talked with Mitch Landrieu, who is a senior advisor to the president and the White House's infrastructure coordinator. Before coming to the White House, Mitch was mayor of New Orleans and lieutenant governor of Louisiana.

**LANDRIEU:** I was lieutenant governor of the state of Louisiana for six years. Louisiana's a red state. It's a very rural state. I was elected twice statewide. And in order to get elected and to stay elected, you got to go see folks and you got to go be with folks. Louisiana's got a lot of really, really, really small towns. Sunset, Louisiana, is six blocks long.

**PIPA:** Mitch is helping the White House make sure the money approved in the bipartisan infrastructure law gets spent effectively and reaches the communities that need it. I asked him to describe the opportunities in the bill for rural America.

**LANDRIEU:** \$1.2 trillion, investments in roads, in bridges, in airports, in ports, in waterways, building high speed Internet infrastructure to make sure that everybody has access, to that clean air and water. So, let me go through those just a bit. One of the first announcements that we made was the need to rebuild 15,000 bridges, what they call off-system bridges, that are crisscrossing the country. Many of these are specifically in rural America. These are small bridges that get us across the bayou or across the canal or across the lake. Everybody knows that if you're stuck on one side and you're trying to get to the other side and you don't, you've got to go down the road another five, six, seven, eight miles. It gets in the middle of people having access to health care, having their houses put out if they're on fire by the first responders, or just getting goods to market. So, that's critically important.

The other is access to high speed internet. If you're a kid sitting on the porch in Appalachia or you're in the Lower Ninth Ward or even one of the tribal communities out West or in Alaska and you don't have access to knowledge, there's no chance that you're going to be able to fulfill your God-given potential.

Clean air and clean water. And the massive investments right now are crisscrossing across the country and have felt most acutely in rural America as well.

And now if you're thinking about what's coming next, the clean energy economy, making sure that everybody in rural America has access to all of the new kinds of technology that are coming out—solar, wind. New ways to create energy, and of course, the electric battery revolution that's coming along. When these new vehicles start rolling off of GM's plant or Ford's plant and the Ford F-150 pickup truck comes out, all of that stuff's gone into rural America first.

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**PIPA:** Put it all together, and there are a lot of investment opportunities. When you look at it from that perspective, our government is trying to be responsive to the investment needs in rural America.

But that maze of programs—it's a tough nut to crack. Many rural towns have volunteer elected officials and small staff. One person might do four or five different things in a community. Each of the officials I talked to acknowledged that it can be challenging for communities to identify the right program, complete a grant application and get approved, and manage and execute the project.

Remember Betsy Kramer from our first episode in Shamokin, Pennsylvania, describing what it takes?

**KRAMER:** But the ask isn't simple that they just get on the phone and call. You need a person. And that's something that has been missed in the past. Because when I've addressed this before, I've heard "well, we are making a new webinar for this or that." You need the human contact, you need a person, you need the capacity.

So, the getting the grant is the easy part oftentimes. Although, a lot of grants are not that easy to get—but, I've got to be honest. But it's the it's knowing that the grant exists. It's knowing that you can apply for a waiver for the match. Huge. It's getting the legislative support; you need to have the connections. Once again, the human touch, the capacity to reach out to the legislators, super important. We cannot under emphasize the legislative support of projects enough. But then it's also implementation of the grant. It's the proper reporting. Some of these can be very difficult and time consuming.

**PIPA:** Mitch Landrieu recognizes the challenges.

**LANDRIEU:** Folks that live in small communities sometimes don't have the capacity to access their government. And this is true about whether they're trying to access their county government or their state government or their federal government.

**PIPA:** At the same time, each of the officials I talked to in Washington, D.C., emphasized how deeply invested rural people are in their communities.

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That matches the stories I heard in Shamokin and Globe in our first two episodes, and what you'll hear in upcoming episodes. And that's a strong base to build from. Here's how Undersecretary Torres-Small describes it.

**TORRES SMALL** I know I'm in a rural place when I'm talking to someone and depending on the time of day, they might be wearing five different hats, whether it's a farmer or a volunteer firefighter or maybe a mayor or maybe a teacher or a nurse. They're doing lots of things to support themselves, but also the community that they live in.

I was talking to a mayor in New Mexico recently because they've had a lot of success in getting water to their community and also wastewater. And we're now looking at new projects all across the community. And I said, just how have you been so successful in getting this done? And he says, Oh, it's because of Dawn. She works incredibly hard. She invests

time in finding out where the opportunities are. She knows our community and knows what our needs are, and she's able to bring partners to the table. And rural America is full of Dawns, full of people who know and love their community and full of people who choose that place.

I was in southeastern Alaska, and we were talking about community capacity, which, you know, I think of ... that's Dawn, right? That's someone who knows their home, knows the vision for what they want what they want their community to become, but they don't always have the resources or the time or the experience to make that happen.

And we were talking about how we invest in community capacity. And this woman raised her hand. She said, you know, I just have to stop you right there because you talk about community capacity like it doesn't exist in rural America.

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But I want you to know that I'm here and I'm invested in my home and I am community capacity. I chose this place, and I made a lot of sacrifices to do that. I could have gotten a big fancy job somewhere in the city, but instead I'm here in my home ready to give and invest in this place.

**PIPA:** So, how do we invest in the capacity of communities so that they're able to access and use investment, whether it's public or private money? How can we help communities be successful with that? That's something I know I will continue listening for as I collect the stories of these different towns throughout the podcast.

Here's Kim Wheeler, the executive director of SEDA-COG, the organization in our first episode that's been a partner to Shamokin, Pennsylvania, in supporting their revitalization. She has a few suggestions.

**WHEELER:** And I think through this effort, it really opened our eyes even further to understand that we have a real, true deficit of understanding what it takes to sustain communities.

And so, it's not just about writing a grant and receiving a grant and putting it on the ground. But if we don't have somebody who's constantly thinking about what the need is, what the challenge is, what the next generation of opportunity is to draw, to recruit, to keep a place viable, livable, economically feasible. We need to be looking at encouraging and ensuring that we have capacity on the ground some way, shape, or form.

Now, I understand policymakers can't always put somebody in every single community throughout America. That's not feasible. But I think we need to sit around the table and say what is going to make sense.

I think we need to, one, first, have a vision and understand that rural communities are a great place for us, for Americans to live and invest. And then secondly, if we're going to offer opportunities for grant-making, that there needs to be a little bit more of a nuanced understanding that that the playing field isn't level and that there's not an affordability factor to provide the matches that are often required in grants, as well as if you don't have anybody on the ground to really carry that through and implement as well as develop the next plan, then we are going to continue to fall behind.

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And so, I think there needs to be a little bit more conscious thought as to can we develop a creative program that makes sense for rural America.

**PIPA:** This is a theme that I'm hearing regularly as I talk to people in the different towns I'm visiting. Here's Ines Polonius, the CEO of Communities Unlimited in Fayetteville, Arkansas, which works with rural communities throughout seven southern states. You'll hear more from her in an upcoming episode.

**POLONIUS:** We need those flexible funds to help communities implement change. We're done planning. We have been planning for decades. And the plan happens, and then the plan sits on the shelf because a community is never able to secure implementation funds to create the real change that needs to happen. That's what we need right now are those implementation dollars that are flexible. Because again, Community A is not going to have the same strategy as Community Z because they have different assets, they have different opportunities, they have different leadership in each one of those places.

The other really important policy suggestion is we need the resources on the ground to help the smaller communities apply for, put the systems in place to manage, and report on these federal funds coming down. And sometimes a \$100,000 grant is as important as a \$5 million grant. But that's difficult to manage at an agency level with a huge portfolio of grantees. But sometimes a smaller community can get more done with a little bit of money because they simply won't shy away from that, as opposed to having to apply for a much larger tranche of money.

And then finally, I understand the rationale between matching funds. But matching funds is one of the most discriminatory policies against disadvantaged communities, communities in persistent poverty counties, communities in states that have very limited philanthropic investment.

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Because there is no way to secure those matching funds for a rural community that are required by most federal programs.

**PIPA:** Actually, each of the officials I talked to in Washington, D.C., talked about ways they are trying to address this. Mitch described the Rural Playbook that his infrastructure team put together, to help rural leaders learn about what's in the bipartisan infrastructure law that specifically relates to them. He also mentioned special initiatives for supporting coal communities affected by economic transitions and closing the wastewater gap in communities still needing that infrastructure.

And here's Assistant Secretary Castillo describing two new programs that EDA has launched.

**CASTILLO:** And one was the Economic [Recovery] Corps, which really is a program that will add staff resources to local organizations focused on improving economic resiliency and competitiveness in distressed regions across the country because we recognize that capacity component.



And the other one was the Equity Impact Investment Program, which will provide technical assistance to enable organizations serving underserved populations and communities, in particular in economic planning and projects.

With those two focus, we understood that not only do rural does rural America and smaller communities need that additional staff, they needed that additional technical assistance and support, and they needed a much more embedded infrastructure to access government resources to be able to plan to develop their CEDs.

So, all of this was done with a vision towards not just pushing out the dollars, but more importantly, providing the needed resources so that all communities can participate and be able to access and leverage and leverage the resources that are currently available.

**PIPA:** Undersecretary Torres-Small talked about the recently launched Rural Partners Network, which is placing federal staff to live in select communities in 10 states to help them figure out how to navigate that maze of resources.

**TORRES SMALL** And so, the Rural Partners Network is invested personnel from rural development but with training that recognizes that broad scope of programs all across the federal government to go in and have conversations about what's possible. To convene those community leaders who know what their community needs, but because they're wearing four or five, six hats every day, don't have that time or that experience or those resources to go and apply for the grants and other opportunities that are out there.

Brookings has talked in the past about block grants that go to cities versus competitive grants that folks who don't have a grant writer have to compete for. Our goal with Rural Partners Network is to provide a real front door to the federal government so they're not having to struggle to get in but rather can have a better sense of what's out there, can get support as they pursue it, and also have someone listening on the other side of that door saying, "Oh, that program doesn't quite work the way we thought it would. What changes need to be made? What other department do we need to work with to figure that out?"

So, the back-end of the Rural Partners Network is convening by the White House of departments all across the federal world to have a strategy that's grounded in their rural work—

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and specifically to have rural desk officers who are regularly getting together, people in departments all across the federal government who wake up each morning thinking about rural and thinking about how they can better work across the federal government to deliver for people in rural America.

**PIPA:** These programs are new, so we'll have to wait to see what impact they have, and if they make a significant difference. But there is no doubt that to help rural places be successful, federal policymakers are going to have to respond to that challenge of capacity that is especially felt in rural communities and creates barriers to investment.

Another consideration is the wide-ranging diversity of rural America. Our visits in the podcast alone range from the deserts in the Southwest to the Mississippi Delta to former coal towns in the Northeast and Native American places in the West. This diversity is what makes

rural America so special, but it also means that there is no one-size-fits-all solution to the issues communities are facing. Undersecretary Torres-Small talked to me about that diversity.

**TORRES SMALL** That's been one of my favorite things about this job. Coming into it, I had one sense of rural, in rural New Mexico and in rural Colorado. And sometimes that's rural, it's also remote where there's large, large distances between. So, I thought I knew what even remote was until I went to Alaska and it's a whole different kind of remote that the lower 48 doesn't get.

And it's just incredibly diverse. Getting to know the Black Belt, for example, in the South and some of the layers of injustice and discrimination that exist there that compound the challenges that we face today. Working in Indian Country, and specifically just land ownership and tribal jurisdiction, and the ways that that can not fit our programs. And so, we have to look at new ways to expand our programs and make them more flexible. Looking at Alaska and what rural means there.

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Rural America is incredibly diverse, and people don't always see that. The solutions for farm workers in California is going to be different than solutions in the Midwest or solutions in Hawaii or the territories. So, there are real opportunities to engage with leaders on the ground and with communities on the ground who have that expertise in their home and that vision for the opportunities that they can help create.

And the people who've chosen these places often have a vision, have a sense of what that is and how, with investment, they can really help it blossom. And that's where more and better markets becomes crucial.

**PIPA:** We also have to recognize that there are other challenges to delivering public investment into rural places. There are barriers in the form of match requirements, which Ines Polonius referenced earlier. It's often hard for rural communities to come up with some dollars to make these matches, since they have limited access to philanthropy and are fiscally constrained. There are scoring criteria and eligibility requirements for competitive programs that give advantages to urban areas.

Even the type of funding matters. Much of the financing available from the federal government, even from USDA-RD, is in the form of loans or loan guarantees rather than grants. Rural towns can only service so much debt, so it makes it hard to meet multiple needs at once. And lastly, many of the decisions on funding are actually decided by states, which adds another layer of complexity.

So, if this is starting to sound like a headache, well, yeah—it *is* complicated. There's very little in the way of consistent, flexible funding that local partnerships can depend on over the time it might take for a community to transform. Keep in mind how long the work has been happening in Shamokin and Globe, and how much longer it will need to happen for those towns to really come around. Here's Undersecretary Torres-Small.

**TORRES SMALL** When I talk to people in rural places, what's important to them is having partners who are in it for the long haul. Not someone who's there just chasing a one-year grant, or there only for as long as they can guarantee that they have staff people. And yet so many of our programs have that short-term view. We do have good technical assistance

opportunities and good partnership opportunities with local nonprofits and community organizations, but they're usually to carry out a specific task.

So, we've got this great pilot in South Dakota where we're working to address some of those trust land issues and how do you get homes built on land where the title looks different than what we're used to. But that program is really specifically for this amount of money and this amount of homes. If we can invest more long-term, a lot of that trust building and vision making can occur in a way that isn't just one home in one place, but a longer vision for better markets in the future.

**PIPA:** Assistant Secretary Castillo echoed this theme as well,

**CASTILLO:** I like to say that community renewal is not a one off and it's not episodic. It's actually persistent and consistent along the way and being able to access resources. So, again, I know that federal dollars, pursuing federal dollars, may not be for the faint of heart, but it is possible. And when I when that comes to bear, that community renewal is really impressive and long standing.

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**PIPA:** As we listen to the stories of how local people are creating positive change in their communities, I hope you'll listen for these kinds of things. I think it's important for helping us create policy that more effectively helps these communities respond to the changes they're facing in the 21st century.

The Rural Electrification Act and the other rural-focused policies in the first half of the 20th century—they made sure that rural America not only came along with the rest of the nation as the modern economy grew, they made rural places central to that growth. We should be able to do something similar today.

Assistant Secretary Castillo recognizes the imperative.

**CASTILLO:** So, rural America is at a inflection point, and I think we as public servants must make sure that we're meeting that inflection point. And here's what I mean by that. It's the opportunity to not only honor those areas in terms of their history, their diversity, their economic platform, but also to journey with them as we make transformational changes to the economic landscape of our country.

I usually say we are at a moment where we are building the arc of the future and changing the economic landscape of our country. But it is individuals and communities who are truly the architects of that. When I think about and when I visit rural America in all of its different iterations, because there is a lot of diversity in rural America, it is important to not only listen to what's happening, but also make sure that we meet each other in terms of the tools and the assets that we can share.

And what I believe truly at my core is that I see rural America. And I say that from tugging at my heart. I see rural America and what it does every day. And how do we bring them closer to not just be able to participate in growing, but also in terms of prosperity and bringing in capacity and leveraging the resources that we have at this moment in time.

**PIPA:** It might mean, however, thinking of things in a different way.

**CASTILLO:** Look, we're no longer living in a place where you pick up and follow the opportunities. I think we have reversed the tables. We now bring the opportunities so that people don't have to leave their communities. We bring the opportunities. And I think technology is allowing us that. I mentioned broadband. If we can truly bring broadband to all communities, including that that infamous last mile, we can now bring opportunities to communities in a way that we've never seen before. And that is also an important economic development strategy, because people yearn for their place. Right? You mentioned Shamokin in Pennsylvania. That's our base, that's who we are, that's where family and community is. So, I think this is an incredible moment in time to think about economic to think about economic development from the perspective of bringing opportunities into communities and not waiting to pack up and leave.

**PIPA:** From Mitch Landrieu's perspective, there is a lot of life left in rural America, and it starts with its people.

**LANDRIEU:** And so, as I was a politician traveling around the south, I thought about that in the same way in all these smaller towns and counties that have gotten left behind or hollowed out. We found that you could actually rebuild them. If you have a good partnership between the government and the private sector, the not for profit sector, the faith-based community. If you think about art, you think about music, you think about restoring manufacturing, you start creating these little hubs.

These small towns, and small communities across America are very strong and have what I like to call, as the mayor of a city, good bones. In other words, they're always alive in some form or fashion. It's the citizens that stay that actually keep it alive.

**PIPA:** But it's not just up to rural places alone. From his perspective, it's important to recognize those interdependencies between rural and urban, and how much they depend upon each other.

**LANDRIEU:** You know, sometimes politically we think red-blue. But, you know, I'm from Louisiana. The city of New Orleans cannot exist as one of the great cities in the world without the help of all the people in the rural communities that provide all the incredible restaurants in the city, which tourists come from all over the world to enjoy. They can't survive without each other. Oyster fishermen, the fishermen, the folks that are sowing the crops, all that stuff gets sold. It goes outside the port of New Orleans. The port of New Orleans doesn't survive and they can't survive without us.

So, it's a perfect example of it. And, you know, I've lived it for so many years. It kind of comes naturally to me. And I want to tell people around the country, you know, this red-blue thing just doesn't make any sense to me in terms of real execution. Many people on the issue of race think that urban is Black and rural is white. That's not true either. These are all myths, that when you build stuff, it blows those myths away because you find people where they are.

And I like to think that on a regular day, if you're a parent like I am with five kids, you're not thinking about the kind of things that Washington is thinking about. You're just trying to get from point A to point B. You're trying to be safe. You try to feed your family. You're trying to build some kind of generational wealth so you can leave a couple cookies to your kids, and you know you want to be safe, and then you want just basic stuff to work because potholes are a real pain in the butt. I mean, like, literally.

And so, it's government's job in partnership with the private sector to see everybody, to make sure that everybody is included. And I would tell all the people that are spending all their time on CNN or FOX or wherever you head is politically, just to kind of go outside and look around a little bit and just take in the fact that we do a pretty good job of working our differences out. Not to say we're not going to have any problems. I'm not a Pollyannish about it. But this country can do big things, as the president said, when we choose to work together. And to be clear, it is a choice.

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Every day you have to make those choices over and over and over again. But it's not like trying to deal with your family during Thanksgiving. It's really pretty much—you know, if you think about it, it's pretty much the same thing. But, you know, if you're a family member you can't pick your relatives. And citizens in America are like that. You just can't pick your fellow citizens. So, we have to learn how to get along together and to make things happen that actually help all of us at the same time.

**PIPA:** Undersecretary Torres-Small also emphasized the importance of recognizing the links among communities of all different sizes across the U.S.

**TORRES SMALL** One of the main opportunities in this job for me is to highlight how much we depend upon each other. And as we sit here talking and drinking water that might have come from a rural place, or thinking about breakfast and where the food that we ate this morning came from. With the great technology around us, I'm thinking about the power that supplying that. The clothes that we wear, so much of that comes from hard working people across rural America. A lot of places I'm going to go, a lot of places a lot of families are going to go to relax, to rejuvenate, to find wonder, are going to be in those rural places that are only there because people still choose to choose those places as home.

So, we have the opportunity to recognize that connection in a new way, to support each other better, and stop seeing rural places as a place where we get things from but as a place where we share common goals and ideals.

**PIPA:** So, I have to admit—it's kind of hard to describe the idea behind this podcast series any better than that. But what does that mean in terms of policy? The undersecretary finished with a story to illuminate that for us.

**TORRES SMALL** In Florida, there's this farmer and rancher who was facing losing his ranch because Disneyworld was being built right nearby. And he knew that the property taxes and other things were going to go up. So, at first, he kind of doubled down and invested in his oranges and his cattle. And then citrus greening happened and it wiped out a lot of the oranges. And what he did instead of closing shop was diversify. He decided to continue conventional cattle, but also include a high-end, grass-fed option so that he could sell steaks locally to those trendy restaurants that were popping up to serve people in Disneyworld. He also invested in blueberries and a pick-your-own-blueberry operations so that people, when they were tired of riding the rides at Disney World, could come out and be connected to rural America. And then he invested in breeding the cattle and making sure that the cattle, that the line, he could also use to support other ranchers all across the country and all across the world.

So, those three different markets, he was able to expand. He was able to use to both support the local economy and rural places all across the country. And that wasn't because rural development came in and told him what to do. It was because there was someone who was committed to having a thriving rural place that next generations, that his sons, could choose to stay and continue to build, which is exactly what's happening.

[music]

That's my vision, is not so much what the federal government's vision is, but how do we support that community capacity that's already there to create those more and better markets, to build more resilient economies that are investing back into a place as opposed to always sending things out.

**PIPA:** Scaling that up across the country, which means doing it with many different types and sizes of communities, being sensitive to their historical legacies—both positive and negative—as well as the assets they bring to bear, that's our current challenge as a country.

Okay. Work session is over. You've been patient!

[music]

But hopefully it gives you a sense of where Washington DC is, and where might need to go, to meet rural places where they're at. As for me, I'm headed south to visit towns in Arkansas and Mississippi, to learn what good things are happening there. As always, thanks for listening, and I look forward to you joining me in early January for the next episode of "Reimagine Rural."

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You can find episodes of "Reimagine Rural" wherever you like to get podcasts, and learn more about the show on our website at Brookings dot edu slash Reimagine Rural Podcast. You'll also find my work on rural policy on the Brookings website.

I'm Tony Pipa, and this is "Reimagine Rural."