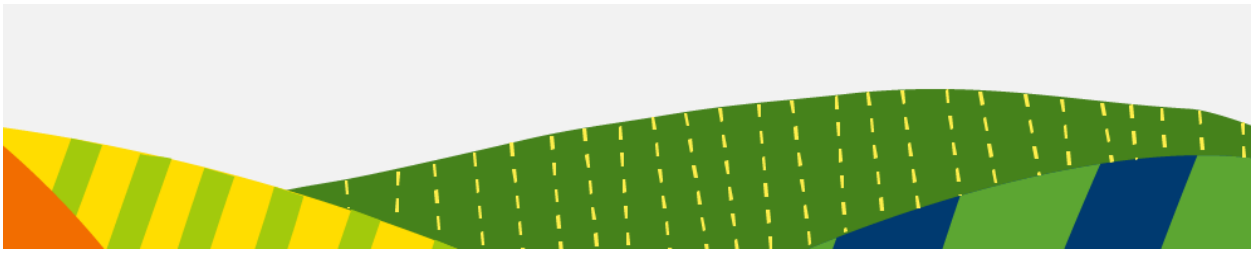

The Brookings Institution
Reimagine Rural podcast

"Protecting community integrity during a creative transformation in West Virginia"

February 14, 2023

Guests in West Virginia:

DAVE CLARK, Executive director, Woodlands Development & Lending, Elkins
JODY FLANAGAN, Mayor, Thomas
SANDRA GOSS, Co-owner, Sirianni's Pizza Cafe, Davis
SETH PITT, Artist and gallery owner, Thomas
WALT RANALLI, Co-owner, Sirianni's Pizza Cafe, Davis
KIMBERLY JOY TRATHEN, Artist, gallery owner, city recorder, Thomas
EMILY WILSON-HAUGER, Director of programs and partnerships, Woodlands Development & Lending, Elkins

Host:

TONY PIPA
Senior Fellow
Center for Sustainable Development, Global Economy and Development
The Brookings Institution

Episode Summary:

In this episode of "Reimagine Rural," host Tony Pipa visits the neighboring towns of Thomas and Davis, West Virginia, former resource-dependent economies that have reinvented themselves as destinations for art and outdoor recreation. Tony speaks with long-time residents who saw the community's decline, and newcomers who helped spur its revitalization. They describe the new challenges that come with economic growth and their hopes for community-focused sustainable development in the future.

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FLANAGAN: When I was growing up as a kid, the industry it was all mining, coal mining. That's what the town was. And just about 90% of the people who lived here worked in the coal mines back then. And then when the coal industry started its decline, the front streets—downtown Thomas and everything—the businesses started to close.

We had a bunch of artists and stuff move into town and bought these buildings. Empty buildings was on Front Street and they started repairing them and making them nice, starting their own businesses. And there's some really talented people that live down here and operate these businesses on Front Street. Most of the people that own these buildings and stuff down here and in Thomas now are younger group of people. So, that's really what brought the town back. It's really what brought us back to where we are now at the present time.

PIPA: That's Mayor Jody Flanagan, describing the transformation of his hometown of Thomas, West Virginia. Once home to one of the largest coal companies in the world, a thriving arts scene has revitalized the economy of this small town and its neighbor, Davis, a town about three miles away.

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The story of that improbable success, and whether the key ingredients of that success might ultimately jeopardize *both* towns' futures, are at the heart of this episode of *Reimagine Rural*.

I'm Tony Pipa, a senior fellow in the Center for Sustainable Development at the Brookings Institution, and your host for *Reimagine Rural*, this podcast series where I visit places across rural America that are making progress on their efforts to thrive amid economic and social change.

Today I'm going to Thomas and Davis, West Virginia, two communities nestled among the Appalachian Mountains in Tucker County, about 170 miles west of Washington, D.C., and 120 miles south of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

But before getting there, I just want to let you know that I'm going to start pulling from the mailbag to share stories that listeners are sending me from across rural America. So, stay tuned for a listener's story the end of today's episode.

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Now, like many small towns in Appalachia, Thomas and Davis were originally built on extractive industries: coal in Thomas and timber in Davis. In fact, Davis was nicknamed Stumptown from all the stumps left behind after the trees were felled. By the 1990s, however, the mining and timber came to a stop.

Here's how Walt Ranalli and Sandra Goss explain it. They're the owners of Sirianni's, an Italian restaurant in Davis that's a beloved local institution. They opened Sirianni's in the late 1980s, just before the local extractive economy crashed.

RANALLI: When we opened our business, we had, you know, coal mining. There was lots timbering. You know, the extraction industry was in its height, really. I mean, you know. And then, what, in the '90s, when one of the coal mines closed—late '90s, was that when it was? When they closed and 400 people lost were out of work.

GOSS: Yeah. Maybe, maybe mid-90s.

RANALLI: And you know here we are in Davis with a business and we're going, Oh my God. It was us and East West Printing and the grocery store that was there. And you know, to an area that's, you know, dead. We knew that was going to happen, you know, but when you lose 400 jobs and 400 families out of your area when you're small to begin with.

Everyone just thought this town was dead. The president of the bank who owned the Purple Fiddle building said, you know, I don't know what you're here for and nothing's ever going to come back here. Coal mining is gone. You know, that's sort of the feel that the whole town have. If the bank has that feeling then you're going, Christ.

PIPA: Now, 400 jobs might not sound like much. But the population in both Thomas and Davis is about 600 people each—so, yeah, it was a big deal.

The storefronts in the main business districts in Thomas and Davis basically emptied out, except for a business here or there.

At the same time, the area is full of natural beauty like Blackwater Falls State Park and the Dolly Sods Wilderness area. Activities like cross-country and downhill skiing, mountain biking, and hiking were attracting some people into the area on a seasonal basis.

RANALLI: But people here didn't see tourism as an economic driving tool. They just thought it was something that, you know, people were playing with at that time, you know, how are we going to build a business on tourism or on the arts or on, you know, it was, you know, because there were so used to having the company—

GOSS: —the coal mines, timber—

RANALLI: —and that whole colonial … what's that called, I like it … a colonial mentality where, you know, someone else is going to bring the money here for us instead of us creating our own money—

GOSS: —yes—

RANALLI: —bringing money from outside—

PIPA: —creating your own value—

RANALLI: —and creating our own value. And I think that happened all up and down with that whole mentality that coal companies that created this, you know, you belong to us sort of mentality that they … it did something to their self-worth, you know what I mean? And, and so that's what we were dealing with.

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PIPA: Walt was Mayor of Thomas in the 1980s, one of the youngest mayors in the nation at the time. He saw up close what the loss of the coal economy was doing to the town. He thought it important to break out of what he calls the "colonial mentality"—depending on outsiders to rebuild the economy rather than generating it themselves

Both he and Sandra thought that outdoor recreation could be part of the answer. But at the time the seasonal influx of visitors was hardly enough for Sirianni's to break even.

Walt had a vision for restoring a historic opera house in Thomas and turning it into an anchor to revitalize the business district. The Italian immigrants who worked these mines prized culture as much as hard work.

GOSS: Thomas was a big Italian town. And they valued music, they valued education. That's what they came here—

RANALLI: —art—

GOSS: —they came here to get another start to make a living for their families and create something. And they knew how to create a business that was needed. So, they were all able to flourish from that.

And, they … I mean, one of Mr. Tobacco's daughters was the piano teacher, and so she gave piano lessons to everyone. Mr. Santangelo had the Santangelo Building, he was the shoemaker, but he was a very talented musician. And they had little bands in town that were really good, like really good bands, that '40s, '50s music.

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PIPA: The town struggled to convince state and federal officials that funding an opera house in a rural town was a good idea. But Thomas's legacy of music would continue in an unexpected way.

In 2001, John Bright and Kate Richards, who were seeking a quieter location to begin a family, purchased the vacant general store to open the Purple Fiddle, pursuing a dream to create an open and friendly space highlighting Appalachian music.

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They made a point of making it accessible to children, and they balanced ticketed events with free performances. The Purple Fiddle became as much a community gathering place as a performing venue for musicians from across the region. News of this unique space spread all the way to the Midwest, where it reached Seth Pitt.

PITT: I was working a super lame, menial job and had the option to work at the Purple Fiddle instead. I was planning on just coming down for the summer, but that was 18 years ago.

I came from Michigan, but I wasn't living in my hometown. I was just largely following around friends trying to find cool spots around the country. And then the first place I moved to out of state was Thomas, West Virginia. And it just really it just really hit with me. I was just starting to make art at that time, and I picked up the job at the Purple Fiddle. I didn't have to work a lot of hours. Rent was really cheap. And so, creatively I just had a lot of time and that really just kind of blossomed here really quickly. And then doors kept opening.

PIPA: As he said, Seth had just started making drawings and creating art. He quickly came to love the town. So he began inviting friends to come join him.

PITT: So, I moved here and everything was fantastic and there was a fantastic community, but I didn't have my friends, you know. So, there was somebody who I had worked with up in Michigan, whose name is Cade, who now owns Tip Top, it's the coffee bar. He was the first one I reached out to because he was kind of doing a similar aimless thing as me.

I think my pitch to him was, "Move here. It's beautiful. Community is great. I can get you a job." And at that point in a lot of my friends lives, I think that was kind of enough. There's a cool town, there's a good job, it's cheap. And that was enough for them to do the same thing, maybe move down for a little while.

PIPA: Kimberly Joy Trathen was another one of those people who moved to Thomas based on Seth's pitch. Originally from Michigan, she's an artist who was living in Oregon at the time.

TRATHEN: He had a building with studio space and had the gallery kind of started down there, and he was just like, Hey, come move here. There's a space to do your work. There is a place to live. It's in the middle of a national forest, it's inexpensive. So, really, I have him to take credit for why I'm here.

PIPA: Once she arrived, she wasn't so sure about what she'd done.

TRATHEN: And I was kind of like, Uhh, this is really small. I was really nervous to live in such a small town. And at that point, 11 years ago, it was very underdeveloped on the street and whatnot. So, I was nervous.

PIPA: But there was something special about the town and something special about the artistic community they were creating. Here's how Seth describes it.

PITT: We were just trying to make things. But that was drawing people too, because people are sitting outside, you know, playing music and people were inside making things, and people would come by and it was really, you know, it was really it was a really a quiet town at that point. So, it was just really open door policy. A lot of times after the Purple Fiddle, like, the party might move down the street to the studio and then, you know, people would come back a couple of times and eventually feel maybe like this was their place to be, to be in that community.

PIPA: Kimberly explains what it meant to come to the town a few years later and become part of that community—both for her art, as well as her future.

TRATHEN: A lot of late nights making art, just, like, hanging out. And I think that, like, that was really informative because it, you know, if you bring a bunch of people together

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just without the need to like work a whole bunch or, you know, with like, I don't know, just we just had like a lot of the similar, like, timing as well. So, we could just like hang out and talk and develop ideas and just dream a lot about what we could do here, what we wanted to be like as artists, how we wanted to display our stuff.

PIPA: Now, this might just sound like a gathering place for young people to have fun, fiddle a bit on an instrument, or doodle on a canvas, and hang out together. But there's been a seriousness to these endeavors.

[music]

And over the last 18 years the members of this artistic community became business owners, landlords and building owners, and city council members. Most of the buildings along Front Street in Thomas have been refurbished and are home to galleries, studios, restaurants, and unique shops alongside the Blackwater River. Davis has a locally sourced grocery, a couple of refurbished inns, a craft gallery, the mountain bike shop that's helping make Davis a mecca of mountain biking, and institutions such as Sirianni's and Stumptown Ales.

The area's poverty rate is around 7%, compared to the state's poverty rate of almost 17%. So how did this revitalization happen?

PITT: So, when I moved here, there were probably about five businesses, businesses on the street, and everything else was pretty much boarded up or taken care of but abandoned. And I always appreciated, these properties that people were still tending to and look, they looked really nice, but nothing was happening in them at all.

And people didn't stop here in except for to get out of their cars and kind of like look around at the buildings because there was a lot of historical beauty to all these old buildings. Thomas wasn't a destination save for the Purple Fiddle on weekends and the evening.

So, as far as the revitalization of what we'll call Front Street or the commercial district, I think that I kind of rode the coattails of the Purple Fiddle, seeing that there were people coming here for live music, thinking that they might be interested in art. And, you know, I opened a gallery and it was a contemporary or at least nontraditional gallery. So, it was something that was really kind of new for the area, I think. There wasn't ... I mean, at that point I didn't really see galleries like that in smaller towns, usually go closer to the city to find stuff like that.

So, you know, opening the gallery all of a sudden put another storefront on the street. It also strengthened the concept of arts, "the arts." And then we also had attached to the gallery a studio, which was kind of a creative space for folks in the community. And I think that looking back that that was a really big deal, more than having the store, having a studio where people could come and hang out and work on their craft and be encouraged by each other to take it seriously.

PIPA: But Seth also acknowledges that there was no grand strategy.

PITT: The development of, like, our business and our arts community happened really organically. And when I try to look back at it to figure out how we did it, I have to kind of, like, make it up—because we didn't ever think about it. You know, we basically opened our art gallery because our landlord said, There's a storefront that just became available right under your apartment, and we were, like, scared that somebody was going to move in there that was going to be, you know, loud or play bad music or, you know, it was in our building. So, we were like, Oh shit, we should rent that! What are we going to do with it? And we're like, Well, we've been making all this art over in this studio, maybe we could do that.

PIPA: Kimberly Trathen describes how such conversations led to the artist-run project space that she now helps run.

TRATHEN: So, like from that, a lot of conversation, it's moved towards like, well, what if we like made the gallery like, you know, more focused on local art or what if we had a gallery that you could just do exhibitions that are solo or installation based or experimental? And I think, like, through those conversations and through time, we were able to kind of solidify the idea that maybe we do want to look for a space where we can do more experimental art or experiential art. So, that's like the art focus of my life here.

And so, that was kind of how we came to buy this building and whatnot.

PIPA: And, yes, let's not forget the pull of the surrounding natural beauty and the outdoor recreation it offered.

PITT: I think our proximity to that state park was really, really important. I think that no matter what was happening in this town, people were passing through because Blackwater Falls is a beautiful state park. And then the more I thought about it, I realized, Well, the wilderness area, Dolly Sods, and Otter Creek for that matter, are also attracting people and just pulling them here, just pulling them through, whether they're planning on stopping or not, they're just driving through. And those are different groups

of people. People who go to a state park and people who go hike in the wilderness area are different types of people. And then, mountain bike community popped up and the skiing community was already here, of course. And that all brought like different demographics.

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And I think in the beginning, it was it was pretty cool because people didn't expect what they were going to find there at all. You know, they were like, what is an art gallery doing here? What is this music venue doing here? So, I think we had a little bit of charm on our side in the beginning. People were just kind of shocked.

PIPA: That exactly describes my first experience in Thomas. Driving home from a family vacation, we'd decided to detour a couple hours out of our way to see Blackwater Falls. When my then 8-year-old daughter announced an immediate need for a bathroom break, we stopped and parked at the first buildings we happened upon and walked right into the Tip Top coffee shop that Seth's friend Cade had opened.

The shock was immediate. I was one of the hippest and friendliest cafes we had ever been in, bar none—New York, San Francisco, wherever.

We ended up roaming the town for the better part of the day, happening upon live music outdoors at the Purple Fiddle, peering into the galleries with working studios attached, and discovering unique items in the antique shops. We almost forgot to see Blackwater Falls.

Seth Pitt and Kimberly Trathen were newcomers at one time too, entranced by what the region has to offer. And even as they decided to stay, become investors and business owners, they were sensitive to the importance of building relationships with the people who called the area home long before they arrived and contributing so benefits were widely shared. Here's Kimberly again.

TRATHEN: The relationship, I think, is definitely multifaceted. There are some folks who really appreciate art in general, and appreciate music, you know, are used to the Purple Fiddle, which is down the street, which is there's live music all the time, are used to kind of a more like, you know, the galleries that were here before us. So, the continuation of that, I think that a lot of folks do really appreciate.

And then there are folks that don't really care. Obviously, you know, right. We are down here on the street and they're kind of like up in the hills and they stick to themselves and we stick to ourselves.

And then there is a really real part of the equation of that the fact that we do did take over a lot of these empty storefronts and turn them into businesses that we are like providing taxes. There's a 1% increase in sales tax just in the city of Thomas that came to be maybe, like, six years ago at this point. And so we're generating income for the city and I think people see that as well.

PIPA: That sales tax was passed while Seth was on the city council, where he served for six years.

PITT: And so, I one day just wandered into the city hall to go talk to the mayor about something. And when I did, he said, Hey, would you serve on council? And I had never thought of that before. He was like, we have an empty seat, we need it filled, it'd be nice to have somebody from down on Front Street.

At that point, I think it became pretty clear to people that, like, this was going to continue to grow. A revitalization, it wasn't just some, like, short-term thing. It was like, okay, y'all are sticking it out for a while. You're improving your buildings and stuff like that.

So, I just jumped on council. I got to learn a lot about the city. I think the most exciting thing that happened when I was on there was we passed a _____ where we get 1% sales tax, we raised it from 6 to 7 and then we get the return on that. And that was really exciting because we started to immediately, after just a couple of months, like be able to pave roads and fix things up in the neighborhood.

That was really cool for me because I knew that coming in and developing this strip of businesses in a really quiet town as an outsider, like, as somebody who had not grown up here, there was a little bit, I don't know, a sensitive to it, you know, changing a changing a place that I didn't necessarily know super well. So, when it started to become really clear, like, where is this 1% sales tax? We had a bank account, and you could see it grow. It's like, where's this coming from? Well, it's coming from the storefronts.

PIPA: Kimberly Trathen succeeded Seth on the council. She's now the town's recorder.

TRATHEN: And it's super interesting. It's very time consuming. It's a volunteer position. So, we've been working anywhere between like, you know, five and 40 hours a week for the past—

PIPA: —on top of your job—

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TRATHEN: —oh, yeah. Mm hmm. It's been tough, but I think the drive to keep going is just because of, like I said, this place is my home, it's my livelihood. And not only mine, but like the whole community's.

PIPA: The close-knit arts community, the natural beauty, the entrepreneurial spirit—it all sounds like a snap to make happen. But, as regular listeners of this podcast know, local governments in rural towns are often constrained. And the situation in Thomas and Davis, in spite of their successes, is no different. Here is Mayor Jody Flanagan of Thomas.

FLANAGAN: It's challenging being a mayor of a small town. First of all, I can tell you the structure of our government—our council, like you said, when you asked me, we're

volunteers. We don't get paid. We have our whole council and mayor, everybody's volunteer. We have one city clerk that we employ, and four city employees.

PIPA: Jody is a native of Thomas who moved back in his late twenties and has been a small business owner for over 20 years, running an automotive and heavy equipment repair shop with his father and brother. He started on city council in 2004, just as these changes started happening.

FLANAGAN: It's also challenging on both levels, the state and federal government, because we have infrastructure needs in a small town, because this town's so old so we have a lot of infrastructure needs: water, sewage and stuff like that. Some of our lines are over 100 years old that we still have to use. And when you go apply for a grant, there's always matching money. And being a small town like that, it's really hard to come up with the match money on your grants and stuff like that,

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because we don't have two or three million dollars sitting in our checking accounts, you know. So, that's a big, big problem for us.

PIPA: So, another key ingredient to the town's success has been the quiet and steady partnership of an organization called Woodlands Development and Lending. Here's Dave Clark, executive director.

CLARK: So, we bill Woodlands as a as a full blown community development corporation. And we engage in a variety of what I would generally refer to as community-based real estate development. We do a lot in downtown redevelopment. We do a lot with community facility work, kind of parks and trails, green space community centers; work a lot of vacant, dilapidated buildings in some of our neighborhoods. And then in 2012, really, we started a community development financial institution, or CDFI, that does small business and commercial real estate lending and support.

So, Woodlands from the beginning really focused in on three counties, three very rural counties up here in the northern part of West Virginia, Randolph, Barbour, Tucker Counties. It's about 2,000 square miles, but it's only about 50,000 people. And over the years, as we've grown, we've decided to kind of maintain a focus on those three counties. That's really part of our strength is having a very local focus.

PIPA: For Walt Ranalli and Sandra Goss, Woodlands' role has been pretty clear—in effect, they've been the venture capitalists behind the boom.

RANALLI: But the biggest thing which we had talked earlier was those young people getting capital. When I think of Woodlands, I think of for a business or a young person who was wanting to start a business in a rural, small town, they have the vision to realize that to take the risk, to give money to that business. And, you know, whereas small town banks, not all of them, but sometimes don't have that or don't want to take

that risk. And having venture capital companies like Woodlands, they might take the risk that a bank might not.

GOSS: And once they did that, then the banks are seeing, you know what?—

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RANALLI: —maybe the art business is not such, you know, so they were the catalyst, I guess, is what I'm trying to … I'm not trying to put down the local banks or anything, but—

GOSS: —it was difficult—

RANALLI: —It was very difficult. They didn't, you know, you went in there and said, hey, I'm going to open up a gallery and and hell, we were opening up a restaurant, [they were like] out of your mind?

PIPA: Woodlands helped Seth Pitt buy the building that houses his original studio and the apartments above it. They helped him finance the purchase of the building that houses the gallery. They also helped Kimberly Trathen buy the building for the art initiative and the project space in which she's involved.

TRATHEN: They have provided not only small business grants, but individual artist grants, technical support for even like helping people who want to become nonprofits. They have their hands all over all over the place. And it's really, really, I don't know, they're they're one of my favorite organizations around here. They just help so much.

PIPA: They've also been a big help to the town's government.

TRATHEN: Woodlands has been extremely helpful to the city in terms of providing technical support, providing for grants, let's say, for different programs, providing small grants actually to help with certain things in the city. Just their expertise in the community and especially, like, housing, which is a huge issue here.

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I mean, just across the board with manpower, with resources, with technical support, they are … they've been instrumental in helping us currently move through this transition, this government transition that we're in.

PIPA: Woodlands has the expertise to access federal funds and put them to work. They receive funds from the Treasury Department for their community development finance institution. They attract new staff through the AmeriCorps program. They take extensive advantage of relending programs from the U.S. Department of Agriculture. They capitalize loan pools through the Appalachian Regional Commission. Their experience with the city and its business owners proves that these federal investments can and do work.

So … success, right? Well, yes. But success brings its own issues. Here's Emily Wilson-Hauger, director of programs and partnerships at Woodlands.

WILSON-HAUGER: I guess the big thing that no one can talk to me much longer than 10 minutes before I bring up is workforce housing and our lack of workforce housing right now. Affordable housing. We did a housing study in 2015, and were pointing to it then. But COVID kind of exacerbated that with a lot of second homeownership and inflated real estate prices.

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So, we've been doing a lot of planning around how to kind of build significant amounts of workforce housing in the area or facilitate that. And it's, you know, that's hard for a number of reasons. And but we've I think we've helped facilitate the conversation.

PIPA: Everyone I talked to in Thomas and Davis mentioned the need for additional housing for the people there. Since much of the surrounding land is protected as part of a state or national park, it leaves fewer options for new construction. And part of the issue is the increasing proliferation of Airbnbs. That's tricky, as Seth Pitt explains.

PITT: I think that one of the biggest things to deal with workforce housing is that we need some sort of regulation on Airbnbs. I think that's probably what a lot of people are thinking and we still haven't done that. You have to be careful with it because it's also the way that people are fixing up their old structures—both the houses and the buildings, like, need a lot of attention. So, somebody might be able to afford to buy the building but then can't afford to maintain it. So, they can put an Airbnb in a unit and, you know, do what we did and still keep long term.

PIPA: Everyone is determined to serve the people who are currently living there. Emily Wilson-Hauger clarifies.

WILSON-HAUGER: I think my focus is trying to keep displacement down and keep the community members here, both folks who grew up here and have generations who have lived here, but also folks who've chosen to move here and love it and contribute to the community in all kinds of ways. Making sure they all have places to live, that they have a community they're proud of, that their well-being is really taken care of. And I think as a result of that, tourists are going to come and other kinds of, you know, economic diversification,

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different industries might come if we have kind of a happy and healthy community here. So, I just hope we can get to a place where we can really be sustainable and provide a great quality of life for community members.

PIPA: Another investment that's been decades in the making has also been important. Since 1965, soon after the Appalachian Regional Commission was created as part of President Johnson's War on Poverty, there have been plans for a highway through the

state to connect West Virginia to the rest of the nation. The four lane road recently reached Davis, cutting the travel time from Washington, D.C., and making it a lot more driver-friendly. Sandra Goss explains what it's meant for business.

GOSS: And then in 2015, when the road was finished to the edge of Davis, we worked so hard that summer. We're like, What is going on? And then it dawned on us what was going on. And when my son looked at the books, from May through October—and we at that point were a stabilized business, we did between 2 and 5% difference every year. Like that's how our margin was. We did the same amount of money. So, from May to October of that year, every month was at least 15, 20, or 25% more than the year before. And that's a tremendous increase in business.

And the next summer, which we've turned into a really flourishing spring and summer business—fall is really where the biggest amount of business is—the next summer, we also had all of those months had another increase, 5, 10%, something like that. So, that road was a tremendous difference when it hit the edge of town.

PIPA: The arrival of the highway to Davis has been a real boost.

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It's in keeping with an age-old principle of rural development: good infrastructure is critical for connecting to markets and services. But the highway is not yet fully complete. Work on the final piece, which will connect it to another major thoroughfare, is due to start soon.

And current plans have the new extension cutting right between Thomas and Davis. There's some controversy about its placement, as some worry it will disrupt the connections between the two towns. But no matter where it's placed, the newly connected highway will be nearby. It has local leaders thinking about what that will mean for what they've built. Here's Kimberly Trathen.

TRATHEN: We are in a really unique position right now of growth. You know, this area is growing very, very quickly. And making sure that we have all of the systems in place, you know, a comprehensive plan, you know, legal frameworks to fall back on in terms of ordinances and specifics like that.

I think that there are, of course, concerns over the highway and, you know, what it's going to do to the community. You know, what it's going to do to, you know, our sister town, Davis. You know, we're so close and and our communities overlap in such ways. Like, is it going to divide the communities or is it going to, like, you know, is it going to become so easy for people to come here that we might not have the ability to sustainably deal with it? I think that's a little bit more in me, my concern—are we going to get overrun?

I'm hopeful that we can with the development that is coming—because it's coming—that we can kind of work together and, like I said, just sustainably grow the area where it doesn't feel overrun. Where other, you know, people who've grown up here their whole

lives are ... their voices are still heard. You know? Everyone's voices are still heard and we're able to somehow move forward without people getting left behind.

PIPA: Mayor Jody Flanagan wants to ensure that the downtowns that make Thomas and Davis so unique remain protected.

FLANAGAN: So, we can keep the integrity of our town the way it is and preserve the history of this small town, because it is a very unique and beautiful town. Thomas is a really unique town. It's an old town. And it was built by immigrants working in the coal mines. So, that's what we want to preserve. We want to preserve that. And so far we've done that. We kind of want to preserve our old towns and keep the history alive. And that's what we want. That's what our main goal is right now.

Now we understand we have to have some development to survive. But we have enough land around our city to where we can push developers out there, a mile out of our city, out of our old town area, out of our downtown. And I know things change and everything, but that's what our main goal is and that's what we're working towards right now.

[music]

PIPA: The towns have changed enormously in the 18 years that Seth Pitt has been in Thomas. He recognizes the opportunity the new highway will bring, and the investment and business it might mean for him and many others. At the same time, he, too, is interested in preserving downtown—not just the physical aspects, but the community-mindedness that has made it all work.

PITT: I think one of the most complicated questions about development for me is I want two things that are kind of opposing. One is I want this to become a arts community that is known and recognized, you know, by people who love art all around the country. And I want that because it allows people to be able to sell their work and have the audience and make their best work, which is something I've seen over the years.

But if you want that kind of audience, then you're also turning it into an art theme park, you know, like it feels like sometimes on Saturday. And I'm still very happy with the amount of tourism that we get. But I also really like that we have a nice, quiet town. And I like that it seems that the businesses that have moved in are here ... they're opening their businesses because they want to be part of the community as it is, rather than they see a really nice dollar to be made because of the commercial success that businesses are having here.

[music]

There's nothing I can do about that sort of development, you know. If somebody just wanted to show up and open a shop and they don't care about the community but they know they can make money, like, they can do that. I can't say anything about that. But I really like the way that we've moved forward very intentionally.

PIPA: For Walt Ranalli and Sandra Goss, whose Davis business is in its fourth decade and who are now serving the grandkids of their original customers, it's important not to lose the essential quality that makes the place special.

RANALLI: I think we're at a very delicate balance with that road right now. And I know we have some difference of opinions with the other business people, like the road should come here, go here. That road can be magnificent, it has been a magnificent help to this region, to business in this region and to the development of this region.

But it can also be the detriment of it. You could destroy something that's hard to get back. So, it's a very delicate balance that I hope our governments, our local governments, our division of highways, our business community can somehow come up with the proper way to keep … We have a sustainable economy here with the type of tourism we have and as we say—

GOSS: —to maintain the integrity of the towns—

RANALLI: —integrity and the aesthetics—

GOSS: —and the yes, the aesthetics of the town.

RANALLI: And I think that's important. To me, you know, whether we make tons of money because as a highway or or we're worried about a business going out along there, I'm not worried about, you know, any of that. That's not my worry. My worry is keeping this area because the reason that most people are here is they like it here.

[music]

And if you like where you live, it's a wonderful place to live. But when you come here, it's a nice place to live.

GOSS: It's quiet. It's you can see the stars at night.

RANALLI: It's dark. It's nice. It's like, it's nice here, it really is. And I'm a big proponent of that.

PIPA: Together, Thomas and Davis West Virginia are their own works of art. But there are still brushstrokes to be applied. How well they are placed on the canvas will determine the extent to which they enhance the final composition. Thanks for listening to the creative process.

Now, before we go, it's been gratifying to get positive feedback from so many of you about the stories we're telling. And I love the impetus it's provided for you to tell us what's happening in your own rural town! One story we got in the mailbag is about Old Fort, North Carolina, with a population of 815 people in the Blue Ridge mountains east of Asheville.

Once a manufacturing hub in the 1960s and ‘70s that experienced economic loss when North Carolina’s textile and furniture industries moved overseas, Jason McDougall and Stephanie Swepson-Twitty told me about the efforts underway to use the area’s natural beauty to rebuild their economy.

[music]

Through a partnership with the U.S. Forest Service, they’re building a set of multiuse trails for hiking, mountain biking, and horseback riding that is attracting people and investment into the area. The town has become headquarters for a maker of cycling clothing and accessories, and a public-private partnership has been formed to develop a multi-million dollar community center and business incubator for retail and light manufacturing.

But what’s really interesting to me is how they’ve used the trails project as a community building initiative and collaborative that promotes equity and has intentionally involved members of the Black community, promoting opportunities for a diversity of people to enjoy the benefits of the trails and the economic activity it has generated—something that’s a far cry from the segregated parks and open spaces of the Jim Crow era. Much as Thomas and Davis, West Virginia, are doing, Old Fort, North Carolina, is using its natural assets to build a new kind of community.

So, keep those stories of positive change in rural America coming. Email me at GlobalMedia at Brookings dot edu. Who knows, maybe we’ll feature your story on the air.

And join me for our next episode when I travel clear across the country to Eagle Butte, South Dakota, headquarters of the Cheyenne River Sioux tribe.

[music]

PIPA: *Reimagine Rural* is a production of the Brookings Podcast Network. My sincere thanks to all the people who shared their time with me for this episode. Also, thanks to the team at Brookings who make this podcast possible, including Fred Dews, producer; Gastón Reboredo, audio engineer; Zoe Swarzenski, project manager and policy analyst; Andrew Wallace, Heinz Policy Fellow; and Emma Uebelhor, former research and project coordination intern, all at the Center for Sustainable Development at Brookings; Ian McAllister and Colin Cruickshank, who traveled with me to some of these places, captured the audio, and took great pictures and videos; Chris McKenna, who helped get the show off the ground; and the great promotions teams in the Brookings Office of Communications and the Brookings Global Economy and Development program.

Katie Merris designed the beautiful logo.

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*.