



**The Brookings Institution
Reimagine Rural podcast**

**“A recipe for a rural policy renaissance”
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Guests:

- JIM BACKES, Chair, Anthracite Outdoor Adventure Area Authority, PA
- ELIZABETH BERNAL, Rural Development Specialist, RCAC, AZ
- CHANDLER BOYD-MATHEWS, Executive Manager, Boyd Farmhouse Inn, DeWitt, AR
- JOHN BROWN, Former Mayor (2019–22), Shamokin, PA
- ALEJANDRA CASTILLO, Assistant Secretary for Economic Development, U.S. Department of Commerce
- DAVE CLARK, Executive Director, Woodlands Development & Lending, Elkins, WV
- BRANDON DENNISON, Founder and CEO, Coalfield Development, Huntington, WV
- GLORIA DICKERSON, Founder and CEO, We2gether Creating Change, Drew, MS
- JODY FLANAGAN, Mayor, Thomas, WV
- KALEB HANSHAW, Crew Chief, Refresh Highwall, Mingo County, WV
- LORIE LUIPOLD, Owner, Splash of Copper, Globe, AZ
- INES POLONIUS, CEO, Communities Unlimited, Fayetteville, AR
- ED SIVAK, Executive Vice President, Policy and Communications, Hope Credit Union, Jackson, MS
- XOCHITL TORRES SMALL, Undersecretary for Rural Development, U.S. Department of Agriculture
- KATHY VETOVICH, Business Owner, Shamokin, PA
- LAKOTA VOGEL, Executive Director, Four Bands Community Fund, Eagle Butte, SD
- BOBBY WEBB, Founder and Owner, Webb’s Sporting Goods, DeWitt, AR
- KIM WHEELER, Executive Director, SEDA-COG, PA

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Episode Summary:

In this episode, Tony Pipa reflects on lessons learned throughout his journeys across rural America. He hears from new and old friends about the most important elements of effective rural policy—investing in local leadership and capacity, improving coherence at the federal level, and investing in flexible, substantial grants—but is also reminded that beauty, quality of life, and pride of place are key catalysts for community renewal.

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DENNISON: I am born and raised in West Virginia. On my dad's side, I'm actually a seventh generation West Virginian, my two boys now are an eighth generation West Virginians. I think a lot of times at national conferences and stuff, there's a tone about Appalachia. I think we are, in fact, quite misunderstood by a lot of the rest of the country, and we're sort of viewed as a problem that needs fixed. And I think deep down, if you say Appalachian person, what people visualize is a very negative stereotype. And so it really has not felt most of my life like the rest of the country likes us very much.

PIPA: Brandon Dennison, the founder and CEO of Coalfield Development, an organization based in Huntington, West Virginia, is an Appalachian person—and a community leader, innovator, and social entrepreneur.

Coalfield Development is a central partner in a coalition that was recently awarded \$62.8 million from the U.S. Economic Development Administration, or the EDA. The funds will go to support an economic transformation for 21 counties throughout southern West Virginia, many of them rural communities.

DENNISON: And so with ACT Now we're trying to flip that to say, We're not asking you to come fix our problems, we're responsible for that. But we are asking for investment in the solutions that we're crafting because we think we have a lot to offer the country and the world. You know, because the whole world has to make changes. The whole global economy, whole supply chains are transforming to try and deal with climate change.

And I think it's actually rural workers and rural communities who can lead the way to say, Here's what more sustainable land use looks like with enough forest to actually naturally capture carbon. Here's what hands-on work to retrofit buildings, to install solar and wind systems. We have workers who are willing to roll their sleeves up and do that hard work in ways that other regions don't have as much.

And so, it does speak to that pride. And I do think that it's possible, and I hope it can change not just reality on the ground here, but also change how others outside the region view us.

PIPA: Brandon's honest appraisal of how he experiences the stereotypes of rural Appalachia, coupled with his call to action for significant investment in rural places, sets the stage for this episode of *Reimagine Rural*.

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I'm Tony Pipa, a senior fellow in the Center for Sustainable Development at the Brookings Institution and your host for *Reimagine Rural*.

For this podcast, I've been visiting rural places across America that are making progress on their efforts to thrive amid economic and social change. In my journeys, I've been talking directly to the people who are helping make that change happen, letting them tell the story of their towns and the changes taking place.

My intent in putting the podcast together has been to listen for lessons to inform effective public policy—especially federal policy. In the current media environment, we don't often hear about what's going right in rural America. So, I wanted to visit bright spots—or at least places that have begun to emit a strong, steady glow—to encourage us to think together about what it might take to scale up success in rural places across the country.

Now I'm going to take a step back to reflect on what I've heard throughout the season and draw out some common themes and lessons.

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Think of this as the culmination of the previous seven episodes. You'll hear again from several of the people I talked to earlier. I'll also introduce some new stories like ACT Now's in West Virginia.

I've divided this episode into three parts. First, I'll draw out an initial set of conclusions; second, I'll talk about the implications for current and future policy; and third, I'll end with a set of reflections about things that surprised me.

Before I get started, though, I have to admit, initially we figured this episode would be a wrap on the *Reimagine Rural* podcast. We originally conceived of the show as a limited series that would culminate and end with this episode. However, we've received such a positive response to the podcast that we decided to add an episode featuring voices from towns that we heard about from listeners through the mailbag. So, expect a new episode in a couple of weeks, with interviews of local leaders from four towns across rural America that you suggested.

Plus ... we're thinking about continuing the podcast for a second season. We'd love to hear what you, our listeners, think about that.

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Email me, at GlobalMedia at Brookings dot edu. Let us know if you think we should do a season two and what you've found most compelling or appealing about the podcast.

Okay. Let's dive in. One of the things my conversations have reinforced is just how diverse rural America is. Say "rural," and people often think of a white farmer on the wide-open plains in the Midwest, or maybe a coal miner in Appalachia. And while that's true, it's only one part of the story. I remember my conversation in Washington, D.C., with Undersecretary for Rural Development Xochitl Torres-Small, who emphasized this.

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 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.

Rural America is incredibly diverse, and people don't always see that.

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PIPA: This view was affirmed by my visits to just ten places in our seven episodes. They are very different geographically. Shamokin, Pennsylvania, and Globe, Arizona, have almost the same population, but Gila County where Globe is located is 10 times the size of Northumberland County where Shamokin is.

They are very different racially. Shamokin is over 90% white; Drew, Mississippi, is almost 90% Black; Eagle Butte, South Dakota, is more than 90% Native American; and Globe is almost 50% Latino. In fact, people of color comprise 24% of the population in rural America, a statistic that often surprises the general public.

The towns are also very different economically. DeWitt, Arkansas, is traditionally a farming town—it's the rice capital of the U.S.—but increasingly it's also tied to the hunting and fishing nearby. Thomas and Davis, West Virginia, have shifted from the coal and timber industries to a local economy driven by a vibrant arts community and outdoor recreation. Globe still has active copper mining, and Eagle Butte has cattle ranches that stretch for miles.

Clearly there's no one-size-fits-all solution for supporting community and economic development in rural places. Rather, it's local people who create solutions that make sense for their communities, based on their unique histories, assets, and opportunities.

Our stories show just how important local leadership is to creating successful forward momentum. Think about Lakota Vogel. She recognized that the residents of Eagle Butte, South Dakota, weren't building up a credit history even though they had successful relationships with their home banks.

VOGEL: We're a credit invisible population. Many of our banks are ag banks and have chose not to report on their credit bureau. So, you could have been living here for generations borrowing from the local banks and you're credit invisible because they don't report.

I didn't know that banks get a choice of when or when they want to report to credit bureaus about borrowers' histories, but they get the choice not to. And so, many of our banks chose not to, mainly because their largest industry was not small business, it was ag producers, and it's an annual cycle of payments.

So, Four Bands noticed this back in 2009, 2010 and created a credit building product where you can come here. We set up ourselves to report to all three credit bureaus and start building people's credit histories.

PIPA: Or the group in Shamokin Pennsylvania, who recognized the opportunity that reclaimed mining land might provide. Here's Jim Backes, who became chair of the governing authority for the Anthracite Outdoor Adventure Area, which eventually pieced together 8,000 acres to establish a conservation area and an off-road playground for motorized vehicles like ATVs and motorcycles.

BACKES: I also was an ATV rider at the time and rode them this mountain for many years, so was familiar with the area. But we were also starting to have problems where we had a lot of people getting hurt on the trails. They were out there at night, a lot of young teenagers not, you know, recreating safely. And we had a lot of life-flight incidences, and a lot of issues for the coal operators that still had leases on these lands where people were getting hurt and vandalizing their equipment. So, we knew we could do better.

It's at 6,500 acres of everybody was using it for many different things. Some of them very good and some of them not so good. So, we had a couple of guys, one of our board members, Barry Yarworth, and his friend Jeff Nye.

So, he came up with the idea of, you know, could we make a park like they've done elsewhere in the country? it really provided an opportunity.

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PIPA: This local leadership is evident across the different racial and political profiles of these towns and it has several things in common. The first is that it's often collaborative. Momentum and agency increased when individuals came together in coalitions to set priorities, adapt and overcome challenges, and sustain their efforts over time.

In Shamokin, the town's efforts have been propelled by a new downtown business group called SABER; an alliance of local faith communities; and a new economic development authority.

In Drew, Mississippi, Gloria Dickerson described how her efforts to help local youth believe in opportunity led to collaborative efforts to revitalize the town.

DICKERSON: The kids, the kids say, you told us all this great stuff about possibilities. You told us of how we could thrive. We go home, we don't get that. You need to talk to our parents about the same thing because they don't believe what you believe.

So, I started having adult classes. And finally the adults came to me and said, We see what you're doing for our kids. We do want to be in your classes, but we also want to do some other things in this community. We don't just want to come to classes. We want to improve this town. So, they started coming in and telling me about what Drew didn't

have: We don't have a grocery store anymore. We don't have any recreation for our kids anymore. Our roads are torn up.

And so I said, so let's stop talking about what it is that you don't have in this community, and what do you want in the community. So, we changed that conversation around and they started to say, we need better schools, we need better streets, we need food, access to food, we need access to health care, all kinds of things that they wanted. And I said, okay, well, if that's what you want, we can do that. That's all y'all want? We can do that.

So, they said, Well, I said we can't do it alone. We're going to have to help somebody come in and help us get this done. But I called on some people to help us get this done. So, that's when I, we started the we started the Drew Collaborative.

PIPA: A second thing these towns have in common is that their local leaders and collaboratives are hungry for investment—I would even say starved for investment—to support their community's social and economic transformation. This goes against a widely-held perception that states with rural areas receive disproportionate amounts of federal revenue. These places show that investment for community and economic development, it's very hard to come by in rural places.

Match requirements alone can put the resources immediately out of reach. I heard about match requirements in every place I visited. Gloria Dickerson explained the challenges they've experienced in Drew.

DICKERSON: It's challenging because we've been trying to get some things like, for example, the streets. I mean, they are horrible, but we can't find—we haven't been able to, I don't like the word "can't"—we haven't been able to access funding to fix those. Because if you apply to the feds for federal grants, there's usually a match, and the city doesn't have enough money to make, hardly make payroll. They don't have money to match. When you go to give me 500,000, you tell me I need 20% to get the 500,000, then I gotta come up with \$100,000 that I don't have. And I'm like, why is that? If you going to give me 500,000, but I have to have a match of a hundred, why don't you just reduce that to four hundred and give me the four hundred? I don't understand why you requiring this match. I mean why are you requiring that they don't have they don't have it. So, the people who have money can get money.

PIPA: Ed Sivak of Hope Enterprise Corporation in Mississippi also pointed out the challenges associated with reimbursement requirements. Hope worked with a town that needed \$24,000 of COVID relief funds to buy personal protective equipment, but had to put the money up front and wait to get reimbursed. But the town's entire annual budget is \$55,000 a year.

SIVAK: I think the point that is most important here is not the way that we innovated a solution to get money to these towns. The point is that we shouldn't have to jerry rig access to capital for things like pandemic relief. But these, again, are the types of

hurdles that poor communities and rural communities, Black communities, face every day.

We've got to be much bolder.

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PIPA: There is a mismatch between what the federal government presumes local governments are capable of, and the reality in many rural places. Former Shamokin mayor John Brown described the situation when he took office, with the state of Pennsylvania having enacted a distressed status that gave it oversight authority of the town's finances.

BROWN: We had so much going on that we weren't able to function as a city. We had one city manager and a secretary and city hall. I'm a part time mayor. Every mayor is a part time mayor. It's not a full time job. It's a couple hours here and there. So, you depend on your staff. Our staff was overwhelmed with running of this distressed city, trying to do the thing or jump through all of the hoops that the state wanted them to jump through with different things, and projects were getting lost. I think we were dropping the ball on big plays, on some of the things that we were trying to get done.

PIPA: This staffing sounds similar to mayor Jody Flanagan's experience in Thomas West Virginia.

FLANAGAN: It's challenging being a mayor of a small town. There's a first of all, I can tell you the structure of our government: our council—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.

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And funding is really, really hard. We don't generate a lot of revenue off taxes and stuff.

PIPA: Which leads me to a final conclusion for now: the disinvestment in local government across rural America has led to a situation where towns are struggling to meet their responsibilities to deliver public services such as water and sewer, public safety, and emergency services. So, looking over the horizon to strengthen their resilience and transform their economy, it's a tall order. Dave Clark of Woodlands Development and Lending, which works in Thomas and Davis among other towns in West Virginia, said it pretty succinctly.

CLARK: But I will say, you know, in all three counties that we work in, the largest town is Elkins with about 7,000 people. All of these other communities are really less than 2,000 people. And I think generally speaking, these communities, at least local governments, really lost capacity over the last two or three decades, and their ability to kind of implement, to do anything more than just kind of keep their water plants going and the sidewalks clean is really, is challenging for them. It's often a very part time

mayor and often maybe one full time staff in the office. And that's about all they have to work with.

PIPA: Kim Wheeler of the SEDA Council of Governments, which covers 11 counties that includes Shamokin, Pennsylvania, went even further.

WHEELER: It is actually about, in my mind, a redefining ... it's helping to redefine the culture of how business is done in local governments in rural America. But what we have done is we've forgotten that there's a level of organizational structure that really is a must when it comes to keeping the economy and communities thriving and being able to sustain for the long term.

And I think that if we all were to sit around the table in America and say, we care, we actually believe that American rural communities are our place where we want to invest, and we understand that it's a great place to live, to work, to invest our dollars and our and our time in, then we need to change ... we need to actually level the playing field.

And what I mean by that is we have we have an unsophisticated community from a from a governmental structural standpoint for the most part in rural America.

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And what that means is we just don't have the tax base to be putting towards people, for the most part, and investments the way that suburban and urban communities do. And so we need to recognize that that is void, really, in our rural areas for the most part.

PIPA: So, what to do? How might policy change? Ines Polonius of Communities Unlimited, which has worked with the town of DeWitt, Arkansas, offered two suggestions when we spoke.

POLONIUS: 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.

I think the opportunity is now to really look at how these federal funds actually flow. If federal funds flow to the states, then they're going to be hamstrung by the state policy and may never get to disadvantaged communities, communities of persistent poverty, or maybe even more remote rural places in that state.

PIPA: This means offering investment *directly* to rural communities and allowing those funds to go for things like staffing, organizational processes, and partnerships.

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Federal resources are good at paying for physical things—that is, pieces of infrastructure or facilities—but communities need investment in the people and processes that make changes possible. They need support for the leaders who are making things happen. In D.C. jargon, this is called investing in “capacity.”

State and local governments will need to do their part. Local governments are on the frontlines of keeping communities strong. We should be having a national conversation as to how so many of them have become so weak and debating the long-term fixes to put them on more sustainable footing.

And each of the towns that I visited had a rural development partner, an outside organization like the Rural Community Assistance Corporation in Arizona, and Communities Unlimited in Arkansas, that offers technical expertise, ingenuity, and partnership. These organizations have been essential in helping local leaders fill the gaps in their expertise and strengthen the capabilities of their local collaboratives over the long-term. Federal investment could also help strengthen and scale these types of rural development hubs.

So, policy recommendation number one: more investment in local capacity.

What else? Well, complement these investments in capacity by much better coordination across the federal government, and by making sure the programs better fit rural realities. Do something about match requirements and other barriers that might be unintentional but have huge implications. And it would be a huge step forward to tame the dizzying array of programs that rural leaders face.

This is the idea behind the Rural Partners Network, or RPN, which is placing federal staff to live in rural places, to help them navigate the federal system. Under Secretary Torres-Small explained.

TORRES-SMALL: 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?”

PIPA: This represents a start. But RPN is still in its early stages across selected communities in just ten states and Puerto Rico, and it’s not been authorized legislatively. A national rural policy would help create the policy coherence for such attempts at program coordination and also offer a vision for how rural communities will thrive in the 21st century. Lakota Vogel from Eagle Butte shared her perspective with me.

VOGEL: So, then as the community organization trying to access each of those departments and their rural programing, I’ve got to become the expert in their own program and explain it back to them. And that is exhausting.

I think rural communities experience things differently, but each department in the federal government that addresses rural issues—

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—doesn't talk to each other in Washington, D.C. So, they're all siloed still. It'd be great if there was like one rural policy or focus group that could focus on changing things for rural America, but each of them do it in their own way.

PIPA: The places I visited also sometimes sense an implicit assumption that rural places are becoming obsolete in the face of the current national and global economy.

It creates a question mark among policymakers and investors as to whether we can successfully bring opportunity to rural places in the way that Alejandra Castillo, the assistant secretary of commerce for economic development, suggested when I talked to her.

CASTILLO: Look, we're no longer living in a in a place where you pick up and follow the opportunities. I think we're now—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 that is also an important economic development strategy, because people yearn for their place. That's where family and community is.

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So, I think this is an incredible moment in time to think about economic development from the perspective of bringing opportunities into communities and not waiting to pack up and leave.

PIPA: For this to be the case, we have to believe that rural places *can* thrive, and a national rural policy could reinforce *how* they can thrive. So, policy recommendation number two: Much better coherence, coordination and design, and a national vision that is uniquely rural.

As we look to the future, rural places are actually well-positioned to play a central role as major shifts in the economy take place.

For example, rural places will be where solar and wind farms are located; where minerals for batteries are mined to power electric vehicles and appliances; where regenerative agriculture is practiced to conserve soil and capture methane gases; where data centers are located; and where distribution warehouses for online commerce are sited. Yet it will require investment to ensure that rural places and their people benefit and they can leverage these opportunities for maximum long-term impact.

That brings us to Brandon Dennison and Coalfield Development, whom you met at the beginning of the episode. Coalfield is a partner in a coalition that successfully secured a

grant through the Build Back Better Regional Challenge, or the BBBRC, a one-time grant program offered by the EDA.

It was funded with economic relief made available by the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021. While the program was open to all kinds of communities, not just rural, it represents an opportunity to learn how we can really accelerate progress in areas that have experienced significant economic distress but have put the necessary pieces in place to turn it around.

DENNISON: So, this is the Build Back Better Regional Challenge put on by the United States Economic Development Administration, U.S. EDA, which is under the Department of Commerce. This is not the legislation that failed. Confusing branding. I am what's called the regional economic competitiveness officer, which is responsible for forming a coalition around the economic cluster in a certain region, as per the guidelines of the Build Back Better Regional Challenge.

We formed the ACT Now Coalition, Appalachian Climate Technologies Coalition. And our vision is a very bold vision to take coal country and say we're going to transform to be climate resilience country. And we formed a coalition of 50-plus private companies, two major unions, our two largest cities, our two largest universities, many of our smaller rural communities, and many of the most innovative community based organizations in the state, all rallying around climate technology and climate resilience.

And I think the reason we came together is there's a unique opening in time here to do something really special. There's historic level of federal investment. When it comes to coal, in many ways, I think we've gone through the stages of grief in southern West Virginia, and I think there is an acceptance that coal's never going to be what it was. It's not going to disappear tomorrow, but it's not going to go back to employing the hundreds of thousands of people that it used to employ 20 or 30 years ago. And so, there's a willingness to try out some different things.

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And then many of us had slowly been chipping away at this new economy for a long time, had built a lot of trust in relationships. And so all of that converged to form ACT Now. And even before we won, it felt historic to have to have that much buy in.

PIPA: ACT Now covers 21 counties, almost all of them rural, and received a grant of \$62.8 million, which they matched with \$30 million in private funds. So, it represents an overall investment of almost \$100 million to be spent over four years. I asked Brandon how they were successful in becoming one of the 21 awardees out of over 500 applications.

DENNISON: Genuine trust in relationships had to be in place to pull this off. That's really the first answer. And I think sometimes people hear nonprofit leaders talk about trust in relationships and sort of dismiss that as fluffy. But it's hard work in rural America

to build trust relationships that can stick and that can last. And many of us have done the hard work, and others before us have done the hard work.

So, we're tied into some regional networks that are important. One is the Central Appalachian Network, which is a network of practitioners that get together to share best practices and trends and research and information. The other is the Appalachia Funders Network: Claude Worthington Benedum, Mary Reynolds Babcock, Just Transition Fund.

Several funders have come together to say, how can we build a network of leaders in Central Appalachia that can think differently from the traditional ways of the past and truly move the needle in this region. And I'm one of those, Stephanie Tyree of the West Virginia Hub is one of those, Alex Weld of Generation West Virginia is one of those. And these are these are the leaders of the ACT Now coalition today. So, there's been intentionality to build a new generation of leaders and that should be honored.

PIPA: So, in effect, regular investments in capacity and collaboration helped put the pieces in place for southern West Virginia to take advantage of this opportunity. It's like a one-two punch: invest in the people and institutions who can provide the civic infrastructure, and then catalytic investment becomes possible.

It's important to note that the BBBRC takes a regional approach. While rural communities are often included in the planning of regional economic development projects, they just as often become an afterthought during the execution. Brandon acknowledged the skepticism.

DENNISON: We've been obsessed with following through on our promises and making our work real and tangible. I think a lot of times people are sort of told when a new policy or law passes or a new program's rolled out, this is going to make things better, this is going to make things better. And a cynicism has set in here that is a big barrier to our success because there have been so many broken promises, so many grand designs for transformation that haven't come to pass, and frankly, sometimes just outright extraction and exploitation and oppression throughout southern West Virginia and corruption throughout southern West Virginia.

And it's sort of a very rational response at this point, I think, to be skeptical of some big new, bold vision. And the way we've dealt with that is by being very honest and transparent every step of the way with every project and business we've undertaken.

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And keeping it tangible, you know, this is a empty building that was a problem and now it's not empty. Now there's businesses here and people can believe in that because they can see it, experience it.

PIPA: The ACT Now coalition will need to ensure that its rural projects and partners remain connected. Key partners such as Coalfield Development, and Marshall

University and West Virginia University, they're physically located in Huntington or Charleston, both of which are the area's anchor cities.

Kaleb Hanshaw, who leads a crew reclaiming old mining land and turning it into a site for regenerative agriculture as part of the Coalition, talked to me about the challenges of staying connected. He's in Mingo County, almost a two-hour drive on winding roads from Huntington.

HANSHAW: I think that's probably the biggest struggle for us is to stay connected to people that we're working this project with because they're close to almost 2 hours away. And living in a rural community, you don't have a lot of places around you. If we need something, we're driving an hour one way and an hour back to get anything that we need.

But for us it's we feel like we're pioneering something. So, when you feel like you're kind of pioneering it, you're willing to do that for it to be easier in a couple of years. So, maybe in a couple of years we won't have to make that an hour-and-45 minute drive to Huntington to stay connected. We may have created something here that's local.

PIPA: Making sure the connections to these rural communities remain strong also means meeting people where they are and ensuring that services are designed intentionally to overcome the barriers they uniquely face, as Brandon Dennison explained.

DENNISON: People with barriers to employment is absolutely the focus. And that's the story of Coalfield Development. You know, there's a phrase that we use a lot about not wanting to cream the crop. So, I think sometimes in workforce development, you can do a program in the high school and take 20 seniors in the honors program and teach them in a certain thing and then put them in college and say you've succeeded at 100% rate.

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But that's not what this is about. This is about intentionally focusing on people who are not right now getting access to opportunity and devising very holistic strategies to make sure they get access to opportunity.

PIPA: Four Bands Community Fund in Eagle Butte, South Dakota, is part of another coalition that was also awarded a grant through the BBBRC. It's a coalition of nine Native American community development finance institutions across the Mountain Plains that was awarded \$45 million. Lakota Vogel explained what that award means.

VOGEL: Well, it's actually of that 45 million, 24 million of that is for the revolving loan fund. So, each one of us out of the nine will get on average about 3 million over four years, which also isn't enough, surprisingly. But there are nine organizations participating in this.

So, on a scale, like, Four Bands just in 2023 has pushed out \$1.5 million in small business loans, including agriculture. So, that's just a two month time period of what I'm

able to deploy when I have the capital. But probably towards the end of the year, if I'm not able to fundraise more, we start slowing down in what we can push out the door until I can keep pushing capital. So, 3 million, we could deploy that in a year and we will deploy that in a year, and we'll need more.

But it what it presents, I think, is an opportunity to leverage a lot of the government money. It's going to become equity at some point. So, it's a seven year sort of revolving stage where it revolves and revolves, but then after seven years, it loses its federal identity. So, it'll become and build out our balance sheet as equity so we can leverage it. A lot of private investors are wanting to come to the table now and say, That's great, you've got 3 million here. We'll give you another, you know, 5 million on top of that.

So, big money brings big money is what we're learning.

PIPA: Lakota's organization, Four Bands, has been around for 23 years, patiently building its capital base. But she described what their collective effort might mean for one of the newest organizations in the coalition, the Plenty Doors Community Development Corporation on the Crow Indian Reservation in Montana.

VOGEL: But then we also have an emerging who's never done one loan before. I want to mention that the purpose of this coalition and the 45 million is to say to my peers over in Crow Reservation, to say to her, It doesn't need to take you 23 years to get to the level that I'm at. So, we're trying to scale at a rate that's a lot faster than what it's taken me as an individual to fundraise for. So, we're trying to present her with opportunities and relationships faster so she can get to the point of lending as quickly as I did, so she doesn't have to take the ten years to build up the relationships and stuff.

[music]

So, that was the whole point of kind of banding together and be collective.

PIPA: So, the Build Back Better Regional Challenge represents some new thinking about how to help more places throughout the country get an opportunity to rebuild economies and social ties that can help them prosper.

It's public investment that is place-based, at a scale large enough to give communities a meaningful on-ramp with money that can be used flexibly over several years. It ups the ante, as Brandon Dennison explained.

DENNISON: There is a risk that expectations are high, you know, and expectations are high. I mean, \$100 million is enough to do big things, and we need to do big things. And it's also true it's taken generations to get where we are economically, socially, environmentally. Hopefully, it doesn't take as many generations to get to a new place.

But this is generational work. And I think sort of circling back to what made us ready for this, the main thing that made us ready for this is local community-based organizations with locally-based leadership committed to this for the long haul.

So, I think a lot of times, you know, this is a four-year program and the government wants to say we're going to transform the regional economy in four years. And I think the reality is you're going to see some transformational outcomes. But it's going to take other programs and it's going to take other efforts and other investments to completely transform the entire region. I mean, we have to be honest about that. And it's taken ten years of work to be ready to make \$100 million do big things. And it's going to take another ten years' worth of work to make \$200 million do big things.

[music]

And so we've got to have local leadership invested for the long haul to really make a difference in these communities.

PIPA: And with that, Brandon reminds us about another theme that has been prevalent throughout all my visits: this takes time. Even large-scale investment won't change the economic environment overnight, especially in the places that have experienced steady decline. But increasing the level, flexibility, and consistency of investments in rural places has more potential to be catalytic than an irregular drip of project-based resources, and that should inform future policy discussions for strengthening rural America.

So, to review our policy lessons: number one, make investments in local capacity; number two, create better coherence and a national vision for federal policy; number three, invest in flexible, substantial grants. That's the emerging recipe for a renaissance in rural policy that I'm hearing.

To be honest, much of what I just reviewed reinforces my previous research. But I also encountered themes that surprised me, either because the people I talked to place a great deal of importance on them or because I hadn't really considered them before.

Beauty is the first of these. Starting with the very first episode in Shamokin, Pennsylvania, near where I grew up, the importance of beauty cropped up in every town in one way or another. Here's Kathy Vetovich, president of Shamokin Area Businesses for Economic Revitalization, or SABER.

VETOVICH: As I was going through the process of investing, I bought a building. And that building, all I wanted to do was make it beautiful. And I did that. And then I was making that building beautiful—again, that's part of revitalization, just taking a building and being that spark in the community. So, I took that building and I saw this other building down the road and I said, Lord, I can make that building pretty too. And lo and behold, it came off of the tax sale and I was able to purchase it literally the next week. So, I made that building pretty, and that building turned into a restaurant. While I was opening that restaurant, there were actually three more buildings that I purchased at the time. I am still married, but those three buildings were all made beautiful as well.

PIPA: Former Shamokin Mayor John Brown told me how *he* discovered the power of beauty.

BROWN: So, we took office—and I say we ‘cos my wife, she was very involved with everything that I did—we took office and the first thing that a new mayor does is look to solve all the problems of town. We drove around countless nights, her alongside of me with a clipboard. I’d be talking about vacant properties, dilapidated properties, things that the Codes Office should be doing. Assignments for the police department.

My wife, on the other hand, drove around looking at people’s houses and saying, My God, look at that. Well, I drive around the block and sit and look and say, Which one? She’d say this one. This is beautiful. Look at this house. Look what they’ve done with their porch. After a couple of nights of this, she got me looking at the good things in Shamokin.

We decided then that rather than go to a council meeting and point out all the problems that we’re working on, we’re going to start taking portions of time and saying, Look at Shamokin. Look at how great this is. There are far more beautiful properties than there are rundown properties. But we only ever talked about the rundown properties. That’s all people thought that was here.

PIPA: This emphasis on making things beautiful turns into a development strategy. Many of these leaders focus on improving the quality of life in their communities as a first priority, as the entry point for sparking economic activity.

In Globe, Arizona, the mayor and council made such improvements a priority, renovating a historic school into the first new housing units in years, overhauling an old community pool into a new aquatic center, and creating new parks.

Liz Bernal from the Rural Community Assistance Corporation noticed the change pretty immediately.

BERNAL: In fact, one of the things that have happened out of this process is besides bringing in the swimming pool they’re hoping to bring in, is that the city is getting prettier. It’s becoming a prettier city. A lot of people were complaining about the debris on the main road coming into the city. A lot of different things. So, the city has been cleaning up, making that a lot more visually beautiful to look at. It really is a pretty city as it is and they’re even improving the downtown area with painting. They’re painting several murals and it’s looking just extremely beautiful, besides being a beautiful old downtown area.

PIPA: Gloria Dickerson in Drew, Mississippi, echoed the theme of beauty as she reinforces the importance of improving the quality of life.

DICKERSON: My dream is, first of all, I like to live in an environment that looks beautiful: clean, flowers, nice street—you get on the road and you just ride and enjoy yourself. So, just cleaning up the environment. We got a lot of dilapidated houses still here that needs to be moved from this community. We have kids who have seen when they walk down the street, they see snakes rolling out of the dilapidated houses and stuff because the houses have been there, and they they’re afraid to walk to school and

things like that. I want that to change. I want it to be a place that I'm so proud to look at when I go out, I say, This is a nice looking town.

[music]

PIPA: My visits to these places also reinforced for me the importance of small, locally-owned businesses to the rural economy. Yet traditional economic development practice often focuses on the recruitment of large employers. State and national leaders could focus much more strongly on supporting local entrepreneurial ecosystems. Ines Polonius from Communities Unlimited in Arkansas explained it should be a both/and.

POLONIUS: I think we're still focused on recruiting jobs into our southern states in most cases. The policy needs to have a "both/and" approach, where we're putting equal resources into incentives for recruiting large employers that will probably be either in an urban area, on the outskirts of an urban area, and supporting local entrepreneurship. And that can then happen in all communities across the state.

PIPA: What also became apparent to me is the community-mindedness of many rural businesses. They take the welfare of the community into account when making decisions. Bobby Webb, owner of Webb's Sporting Goods in DeWitt, Arkansas, laid this out.

WEBB: Give you an example, and I totally get it. Billy Claude Adams built Adams industrial line down here. Benny Petrus was a partner of his, bought it. And the reason he sold it locally—he could have sold it to a foreign market or whatever he wanted to at any given time, probably for twice the money he sold it for, but he didn't need it. He made his money. And the deal was he wanted to stay in DeWitt. And I commend Billy Claude Adams for that.

PIPA: Bobby felt that same strong connection between his business and his town.

WEBB: You know, this is my hometown. And probably if I didn't care about my hometown, I'd probably close this thing up three or four years ago. True story. I'd have left here, moved this thing to Conway, Northwest Arkansas, could have done the same thing in five years and probably retire. Metropolitan area, you know as well as I do, it makes more money. I could've done the same thing up there.

[music]

But I chose not to do that. I chose to stay here and weather the storm in a Delta community. And it's worked. It's worked for me and my family and my employees.

PIPA: I anticipated that many of the protagonists in the change happening in these communities might be "homecomers"—that is, people who grew up, moved away, and ultimately moved back to their hometown. Chandler Boyd-Matthews decided earlier than most that he would return to his hometown of DeWitt to make his life there, and is now running the Boyd Farmhouse Inn.

MATTHEWS: So, I grew up in DeWitt and I went off for college, and went up to the University of Arkansas in Fayetteville, and had some very great teachers up there, and actually did my first year under broadcast journalism. And then I was like, Well, I don't think it's for me. I enjoy it, I enjoy talking to people, I enjoy the work. But I have a home in DeWitt, all my family's here, and I kind of wanted to build my own business and be able to contribute. And I just didn't feel like I would have that chance to really contribute if I continued down that path.

PIPA: Lorie Luipold also returned to her hometown, Globe, Arizona, to carry on her family's legacy of creating art from the copper mined there, becoming a small business owner whose shop is now a cornerstone of downtown.

LUIPOLD: Well, when my father passed away about seven years ago, my uncle said, you know, if you'd like to continue this business, I'd like to teach you how to do this. So, after moving away after high school, I moved to the Phoenix area and lived down there for 38 years. I was a special ed teacher by trade and so I taught in one of the public schools districts down there. And when my dad passed away, I decided to move back to Globe.

So, my middle daughter and I came back. We learned the whole process of creating the art pieces with my uncle. And then she and I went on the road and we did art shows for about three-and-a-half, four years, with a travel trailer every weekend in a new place setting up to do art shows. And then she moved back to Phoenix and I knew I couldn't do art shows alone anymore. So, I permanently relocated back to Globe about four years ago and decided to open the store since my uncle was still creating art pieces.

PIPA: But what really hit home with me is the extent to which the people I talked to have *chosen* to live in rural America, even when it can be remote or difficult. That really cuts against the narrative of people being "stuck" in rural. Lakota Vogel explained that pull when I visited Eagle Butte.

VOGEL: There's reasons why we all choose this. And I think that to me, it's about being neighborly and having neighbors that you can rely on. It's a system of support. You aren't remote out on your own. There's a community of people around you that support you. And it's ... you don't even have to ask. It's just done.

But there's a feeling of being here. You put your feet on the ground and you can actually feel the earth beneath your feet instead of a sidewalk. You're connected to things here. You're connected to stories about your relatives from random people at the grocery store asking who you're related to. And that that level of connectedness, the only way that I ever described it is like when I lived away from here it felt like, you know, when you're giving blood and you're just feeling kind of a piece of you drain out? Like, you can last for a little while. I did it for nine years away from here, but I sort of eventually just became a shriveled version of myself and needed to return and get my blood back.

[music]

PIPA: The choice to be rural reflects a pride of place. These local leaders, investors, and business owners recognize the importance of their community's identity.

We talk a lot about individual identity these days, but communities have identities too, and the value assigned to a community, what its neighbors think it's worth, goes a long way toward determining its future.

The people I talked to were honest about having to push against negativity, apathy, and even a loss of hope in their communities. They recognize that part of strengthening their rural place lies in maintaining or restoring trust in their local institutions, so their neighbors have faith that change can happen.

A community's heritage is important to its identity, so these leaders take the time and effort to affirm the town's history while also opening up a path to a new future, one that may shift its identity and connect to a different sort of work.

Brandon Denison explained what that means for ACT Now in southern West Virginia.

DENNISON: Honoring the workers who really have powered the country is, and doing that genuinely, it's really important, and we do it and we mean it. And it's part of why we're still called Coalfield Development. There's a 100-year plus history in this region that has to be appreciated and respected.

And yet, very much our theory of change is we have to be more than just that one thing. We can be more than just that one thing. And if we don't commit to become more than just that one thing, we're going to keep seeing these troubling trends like the opioid epidemic, like unemployment, like health crisis upon health crisis just continue.

[music]

And so for us, it is important, I think, that pride that comes with being a coal miner, the new jobs we create still need to speak to that sense of pride.

PIPA: The visits I've made have been rich with experiences. As you've been listening today, perhaps you feel like I've missed a few important points. Even from the handful of places I've visited, there's a significant amount that defies summation.

I encourage you to reflect on the lessons that occurred to you when listening to these stories, and I wonder if they complement or contradict my own. You can always email me at GlobalMedia at Brookings dot edu to let me know. And don't forget to tell me what you think about a second season.

If you've found these stories compelling, share them with your congressional members and their staff. Share them with your local state legislator. Share them with people and friends in cities and towns across the U.S.

Because what's struck me is just how *unseen* the leadership, innovation, and progress in rural America often is. Several of the towns I profiled in the podcast are still in the early stages of their journeys, with plenty of blight and poverty to address and

improvements to make. I can see how people who don't know these communities might write them off or place them into a narrative of decline.

I'm grateful and humbled by all of them for sharing their stories for our benefit. And thanks to you for listening—and yes, for seeing them. Let's make it our shared national project to support their progress and the countless other towns like them.

Let's reimagine rural.

[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 Kuwilileni Hauwanga, supervising producer; Fred Dews, producer; Gastón Reboledo, audio engineer; Zoe Swarzenski, project manager and policy analyst; and Mary Elizabeth Campbell, research and project coordination intern, both 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.

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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*.