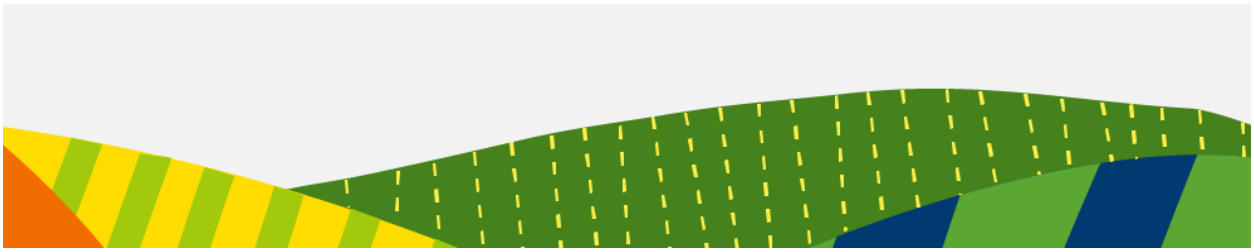

The Brookings Institution
Reimagine Rural podcast

"Bonus episode: Local stories from listeners"

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Guests:

- ALEX BECK, Brattleboro Development Credit Corporation, Brattleboro, VT
- MIKE BRUNGARDT, City Manager, De Soto, KS
- JEFF LEWIS, Volunteer, St. Michael's Episcopal Church, Brattleboro, VT
- MARA SALCIDO, Executive Director, Lovington Main Street, Lovington, NM
- RICK WALKER, Mayor, De Soto, KS
- GREG WILLIAMS, Founder and Executive Director, Sierra Buttes Trail Stewardship, Quincy, CA

Host:

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Episode Summary:

We planned only eight episodes, but we heard from so many listeners across the country that we couldn't help but share more. In this episode, Tony Pipa speaks with listeners from four towns across the country to hear their stories of community revitalization: Lovington, New Mexico, on rebuilding its downtown; Brattleboro, Vermont, on embracing refugee resettlement; De Soto, Kansas, on gearing up for the clean energy transition; and Quincy, California, on connecting a region through inclusive outdoor recreation.

SALCIDO: My name is Mara Salcido. I am the Lovington Mainstreet Executive director.

BECK: My name is Alex Beck, and I work for the Brattleboro Development Credit Corporation.

WALKER: Mayor Rick Walker of De Soto, Kansas.

WILLIAMS: My name is Greg Williams. I'm a founder and executive director of Sierra Buttes Trail Stewardship based out of Quincy, California, and operating in the homelands of the Miwok, the Nisenan, the Maidu, the Paiute, and the Washoe Tribes. Yatahey.

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PIPA: Welcome to the Mailbag episode *of Reimagine Rural*! You just heard some voices from four towns across rural America that we're profiling in this episode based on suggestions from you, our listeners, to share a few more rural places where progress is happening amid economic and social change.

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

I've been visiting rural towns across America, with each episode featuring a specific place and allowing local people to tell the story of how positive change is happening there.

I traveled hundreds of miles for season one but was only able to scratch the surface of how diverse rural America is. It's a pretty dang big country, after all.

So, since our team here at Brookings received such a positive response to the podcast, and so many listeners offered suggestions for places that we ought to take a look at, we decided to add this bonus episode featuring voices from towns that you suggested—and it will give us a window into areas I haven't yet. I only had the chance to talk to all these folks virtually, but our conversations made me excited about visiting their hometowns sometime in the near future!

I'm going to start in Lovington New Mexico, where I talked to Mara Salcido, the executive director of Lovington MainStreet.

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SALCIDO: Lovington is a small town in southeast New Mexico. We like to call all of New Mexico rural, but we're a little bit different than the rest of the state. We definitely have a southern twang, we like barbecue, and we're 20 minutes away from the Texas border.

We were traditionally an agricultural area. However, of course, oil and natural gas has predominated in the last 20 to 30 years, and that's a very volatile industry.

We have about 12,000 people in this last census. About 70% of the community is Hispanic, with the majority of that being Mexican descended.

Friday Night Lights, that's where everybody's at. You don't do anything else other than football on Fridays. And we also have a really cool soccer program that's just taking over state.

And so, it's a family-oriented area with also a lot of transient male population, about 20 to 40 years old, because that's the population that works in the oil field. Right? Lots of families, though, like, everybody has about 2 to 4 kids. Everyone's involved in sports, after school activities. And so it's really a small-knit American, I think, community, in my opinion.

PIPA: Like several others I've talked with during the podcast series, Mara left Lovington for college, and didn't necessarily plan on returning.

SALCIDO: So, I was born and raised in Lovington and when I left in 2009 to go to college, I swore I was never going to come back because the town was filled with vacancies. It looked empty. There was no opportunities, there was no growth, there was no anything.

And so I left and I came back for a summer and it was so different. The entire community was out at a local street event. They had road closures and then all of a sudden there's these new businesses that were coming in and there was all of these new things that were happening. And so, for the first time, in my opinion, there was a lot of potential that Lovington all of a sudden had.

And so, a lot of it was spurred by Main Street and their program or the way that they were doing some of their projects. And so, really it was about rebuilding the downtown, which is traditionally where small town communities like mine used to gather. Right? That's where all of our businesses used to be. And so it's trying to bring back to life some of those spaces.

And so Lovington has definitely changed, I think in the last 15 to 20 years very drastically. It at first seemed very slow, incremental change. Right? It was like, Oh my gosh, is anything happening? But then all of a sudden you realize that actually private and government are working together, that foundations are coming in and also stepping up, that we had auxiliary organizations that are now also offering different services.

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And so what I think ... it takes a village. Right? And so, for Lovington, it's been about collaboration and partnerships to really revitalize the community as a whole.

PIPA: I love that Mara used her passion as a homecomer to help revitalize the downtown area that brought her home in the first place. I asked her about her favorite developments over the past several years.

SALCIDO: So, my favorite is actually Dry Lands Brewing. It was the first private construction in downtown and actually in all of Lovington for 30 years. And so, it's still the only brewery in all of Lee County, and it's centered in downtown Lovington.

The really cool part about it, again, talking about collaborations, right, and how everybody comes together and provides something—so the local city has an MRA district, which is a metropolitan redevelopment area, and it allows us to sell properties that are owned by the city for below market value to businesses or private industries that are going to create jobs.

So, they were able to take this lot that had been vacant, that had possible issues with ... it used to be an oil, gas station, so there used to be tanks down there. And so, there was problems with, like, environmental issues. So nobody wanted to touch this property, have been sitting vacant forever. And they sold it. They got a brand new brewery. We have 20 jobs. That's at least for us, huge.

And then on top of that, it beautified the area. They're a main hangout space, and everyone in the entire county knows about Dry Lands. They've actually gone on to expand. They have a full taproom at the casino at Zia Park. And then on top of that, they're also looking at creating a couple of other additional businesses.

So, being able to see somebody local, he's a hometown boy—you know, he graduated from Lovington High—being able to, like, expand this crazy idea for southeast New Mexico, because like I said, we're not like the rest of New Mexico—and just taking it on and everybody participating. You know, Main Street actually was the one that did the business plan development, that did the training for the brewers, that were able to write their LEDA grant application.

And even to this day, like, we helped them during COVID, we were able to get them some additional funding for outdoor seating. And so now they have this amazing two-story outdoor patio, and it's in downtown Lovington. So, it's an absolutely amazing project.

PIPA: Dry Lands Brewing reminds me of some other places we heard about in previous episodes, like the Purple Fiddle in Thomas, West Virginia, and the Heritage Restaurant in Shamokin, Pennsylvania—each of them gives folks a space to gather and adds something special to the local culture. Mara explained that the Main Street program is also helping entrepreneurs try out new businesses with support from the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

SALCIDO: My second favorite would probably be our Food Truck Institute. And so, what we do with that is we want to create entertainment and dining, but it's a really hard industry. Profit margin is very small and the failure rate is very high. And so, we want to again encourage local entrepreneurs and so we provide them the space to do that without any risk. We do in-class training where we talk about permitting, pricing your menu, branding, logo creation, permitting for the city and state levels. Right? We do all

of that stuff. And then we throw them in our food truck and they get two weeks to test out their concept.

We pay for the ingredients, we carry the insurance, we carry all the permits, we provide additional employees if they need them, a.k.a. us. And we let them run the food truck and test out their concept with the community. This gives them an opportunity to see the amount of work, time, money that it would cost. This also gives them feedback on the community like, No, we don't like that, we like this.

And if they don't make a profit, they actually don't have to pay us back or reimburse us for anything that they spent—that includes ingredients, or our time, water, utilities, none of that. If they make a profit, all we ask for is reimbursement on the ingredients. That's it. So, it completely removes any risk that an entrepreneur would have when operating a restaurant or a food truck, and we get to walk them through it. Right.

So, it's been a really cool program. We're on our fourth year. It is USDA funded. So, that was another exciting part. Again, everybody, you know, plays a part in it. It's not just us. It takes everybody, you know. For that program, the city provides us for utilities so we don't even pay water or electricity.

PIPA: Mara feels as if Lovington has a lot to offer visitors and even new residents. In her view, the town's future is bright.

SALCIDO: I just really hope everyone sees how much potential there is there. We have an amazing, amazing downtown with some great bones and some great anchors that really just needs a little bit of tender love and care, and they would be amazing.

And the way that we partner and work together really shows that rural development can happen. And truthfully, that's why I love the Main Street revitalization strategy is because it allows us to tailor it to our specific needs. And it's very grassroots led. Right? It's what's happening here with us, for us, by us.

At least in Lovington, I think it's done a magic transformation. We have a community, it's called Hobbs, it's about 60,000 people in Hobbs compared ... and again, we have 13,000. Right? So, huge difference. And they constantly say, Oh, I wish we had a downtown like Lovington. And I'm like, Yeah, come over here. We're here. You don't need it. We're here.

[music]

PIPA: Lovington is definitely "there," and not just for folks from Hobbs, but for all of us.

Now we're going to travel from the Southwest, and a place where the majority of the population is Latino, to the east and the north, to Brattleboro, Vermont, which is not a place many folks expect to find people of color.

Yet with an increasing population of retirees, smaller size families, and a shrinking workforce, leaders in Brattleboro recognized their future economic health was in jeopardy if local businesses couldn't fill jobs. The solution? Welcoming immigrants.

BECK: My name is Alex Beck, and I work for the Brattleboro Development Credit Corporation. We are the regional economic development organization for Windham County here in southern Vermont, and I'm the Welcoming Communities program manager.

LEWIS: My name is Jeff Lewis. I'm here because I'm a volunteer with St. Michael's Episcopal Church. We have nine refugee families that we're overseeing.

Brattleboro is a town of about 12,500 people. The population's been about the same for a hundred years. It's located on the Connecticut River in the southeast corner of Vermont, near Massachusetts, and very far from Burlington, which is the largest city of Vermont. And they occasionally forget that there is actually Brattleboro here.

We've been through, as a lot of Vermont, through a 25- or 30-year change as the old agricultural economy and some of the old manufacturing economy has worn down, as it has in much of the Northeast. We've been lucky in this corner of the state to be a very attractive place for retirees.

We have a couple of three good ski areas within reach here. There is a manufacturing base here, still. But it had withered a bit and the town was aging and weakening. We were losing population and workforce. So, this this refugee project is a product of a long term engagement of this community with its own future.

BECK: So, Vermont is the second oldest state on average next to Maine. Windham County, which is our county, is the oldest average age in Vermont. And we are largely a homogenous community in terms of race and ethnicity.

PIPA: Jeff used to be the executive director of the Brattleboro Economic Development Credit Corporation, where Alex now works. When Jeff was there, he did what they've come to call a "Doom and Gloom" tour, laying out what the future would look like if Vermont's population dynamics didn't change.

LEWIS: So, then we began to build options. Okay, this is what we're seeing, now what can we do? So, we began to have that conversation with people.

About that time we started a workforce effort that Alex came in to work on and some others. But the workforce one was most important because that's where we saw the greatest vulnerability. About that time I retired from BDCC. And I went to do some other things, helped to create something called the Vermont Futures Project, which essentially replicated the work we had done here in the region for the state on a statewide basis.

We also learned, as we remind ourselves frequently, these things take a lot of time to burn in, establish a base, people to begin to believe that the data is real, that you care

about it, that they can do something about it. This conversation's 15 years old and it just takes a long time to get to the place that Alex is now leading the community into. But it's sustained effort over a long time by really dedicated, interested people, driven by concern but informed by real hard data.

BECK: And we also know that if every single person who was on unemployment, every single high school student, and every higher education student in our region, they drop what they were doing and just started working tomorrow, they'd still be job openings.

And so, the numbers also pointed to the fact that if we did not grow our economy and literally more new people came in, it really wasn't going to move the needle.

Then we were actually pursuing a Working Communities Challenge Initiative, which is an initiative led by the Boston Federal Reserve. And eight teams across Vermont picked their transformative idea to start digging into, and ours was increasing immigration and creating infrastructure that better supported immigrants.

And that was in 2019, 2020. Our two- year plan was to become a refugee resettlement community. COVID happened. Things slowed down. I'm just doing research, cold calling refugee organizations in New England: How did you do it? What's it like doing this work in New England? And someone said, You should talk to ECDC because I think they might be interested in opening an office in Vermont.

PIPA: ECDC was the first ethnic community-based organization authorized by the Department of State for the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program, and now partners with local organizations around the country to resettle refugees.

BECK: And that very quickly turned into, in July of 2021, we wrote the federal application for ECDC to open a field office here in Brattleboro, because we know that immigrants generally are more economically mobile, have higher rates of business and entrepreneurship.

So, we applied to be a refugee resettlement community. We were approved. That was in July of 2021. And traditionally, refugee resettlement is one or two families a month, and the budget for a year worth of people. August of 2021, Kabul fell. And between January and March, I believe 80 individuals were relocated to Brattleboro. So, what went from a long-term planning and we were going to have these two years of Boston Federal Reserve funding to really nail it and to have the systems in place to do this work, flipped on its head.

PIPA: So, instead of planning, with the crisis so quickly materializing in Afghanistan, the opportunity became real pretty immediately. And that meant mobilizing the Brattleboro community to welcome the refugees if this was going to be successful. Jeff describes what happened at his church.

LEWIS: We're a local Episcopal parish. And we heard about this in, actually, June before the meeting that Alex referenced in July of 2021. We heard about it in June. So

we were at that meeting in July, kind of already primed and ready because there was interest in the congregation to align with this, that it was aligned with our faith interest and our faith community sense of mission.

So, a few of us were there, began to talk around, recruit some volunteers, and found a ready interest in that. Just to jump ahead, we now have about 50 volunteers that are engaged in supporting the nine families that we're co-sponsoring and/or supporting.

As Alex indicated, this was not an inflow, this was in flood of refugees, 80 to 100 people in three months, more than anybody was capable of handing into a new resettlement office and a new community.

So, our own volunteer basis is evidence of the community's interest and our support teams have found the same attitude generally in the support systems that Alex talks about, in the school system, the medical system, employment, that people are trying hard to make it work and willing to do extra. We don't find resistance. We find struggle and desire and energy around let's do this and welcome people. One of the local churches downtown created a prayer space for Muslims has become a place of practice for a large part of the Muslim community.

We generally feel that the community has been very welcoming in not just the places of employment. Landlords have gone out of their way in some cases to call.

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BECK: And so, what I see is a community that not only recognizes the humanitarian and the benefits and the humanity of being more welcoming, but understands that as a matter of practice of being more welcoming, it strengthens everyone. You know, all ships rise with the tide, as they say. And it's corny, but this truly is the case. You know, we have more students in our schools, and that was a red flag for the schools trying to fund their schools. You know, the arts organizations have now an entire community of artists that they bring perspectives and culture that we haven't seen before. There's murals springing up over town that I had nothing to do with but if these folks hadn't been welcomed to our community, certainly wouldn't exist.

And so, when we talk about economic vibrancy, it's hard to explain, but we see it now. When you're walking down the street and you see businesses with "Welcome" written in Pashto and Dari; new murals; a new summer camp for kids who speak English as a second language—those are things that don't disappear overnight.

And so, it's really building this community of welcomeness that long-term will improve our economy, which is great. I placed more people in jobs this year than I have in the last five. Whatever.

It's the strength of our community is undoubtably more visible now than it was before these folks arrived.

PIPA: And it's not just been the social sector, or the churches. It's also included the locally owned businesses. We heard often throughout the podcast series about the community-mindedness of rural businesses—remember Bobby Webb and Chandler Boyd-Mathews in DeWitt, Arkansas? Alex gives us yet another example.

BECK: The private sector … is an incredible example of family-owned lumber yards creating prayer space for new Americans, new Vermonters, because those jobs will just go vacant. And employers who you would normally assume may not be the most politically progressive were saying, What can we do to make these folks more welcome? How can we be the employers of choice for new Vermonters?

And that is just a microcosm. Again, the workforce part is what I focus on. But the impact on the community was and continues to be incredible.

PIPA: To me, this story out of Brattleboro is the modern version of immigrants arriving at Ellis Island to help power the country forward—and the fact that it's happening in a rural place probably challenges more than a few preconceived notions.

Now we're going to travel to the Midwest, to De Soto Kansas, a small town outside Kansas City that's about to encounter workforce challenges of its own—because it's now home to the largest economic development project ever in the state of Kansas, a new Panasonic battery manufacturing plant. But let's start at the beginning with Mayor Rick Walker.

WALKER: De Soto has a long history. It's pre-Civil War. Long history for this part of the country. The community was originally founded mid-1800s and then formally became a town during the Civil War. We're a 160-plus years old.

We are unique to the Kansas City metropolitan area because we carried our own identity for so many years. When we had a more agricultural industry in the area, De Soto was far enough away from the Kansas City metropolitan area to maintain our own identity.

And as that, as the area shifted from jobs in agriculture to jobs in industry, we became more of a bedroom community for the industrial manufacturing jobs that are in the Kansas City metropolitan area.

De Soto is special to me because the size of the community allows for a tight knit community. You know your neighbors, people pitch in to help one another if there is a need. It's just a community of a caring people.

PIPA: Mike Brungardt, who's the city administrator, explains that De Soto was central to the country's efforts during World War II.

BRUNGARDT: In the modern era, the town's pretty integrally linked with the Sunflower Army ammunition facility that was constructed by the U.S. Army in the 1940 to support the World War II efforts.

A lot of the community's employment during that time was based out at Sunflower. If you talk to some of the families that have been here for multiple generations, that's why they relocated to De Soto, was to work at the munitions facility.

So, they had about 20,000 employees during the peak employment at that facility. At several times, it peaked, of course, during World War II, it peaked during the Korean conflict and also during the Vietnam conflict. But about in the mid-90s, the Army essentially ceased production at the facility and began the process of reallocating that to the private sector.

So, since the mid-90s, that employment center has gone away and De Soto has become one of the smaller kind of bedroom communities that—like the mayor said, the jobs were in the Kansas City area, some jobs are in Lawrence, which is about 20 miles west of here. But the whole time maintained the small town, rural character that the mayor talked about during that time.

WALKER: Well, obviously with the announcement of the Panasonic project, we are seeing that former ammunition plant being re re-imagined, brought back to life as a manufacturing and job center again. That's bringing a lot of interest in our community from other people that want to add, particularly in the residential area, that want to bring the housing projects to the city. We've had a number of particularly multifamily projects that have come to the city.

Our interest in projects or the inquiries about projects has gone from, you know, a limited number a couple of years ago to a weekly number that might equal to what we would get in a year, you know, in the recent months. So, we become the center of focus for perhaps where developers are looking for the next project because of the need for housing for these jobs that are coming. And then along with that then the thing that will follow will be the shopping the restaurants the other amenities and retail opportunities that come with additional rooftops.

PIPA: The Panasonic project takes advantage of the land that was host to the munitions plant, but which has been unusable until remediated.

BRUNGARDT: Yeah, let me build on the mayor's comments there. Once the Army decided that they did not need that that facility for production of munitions, they began the process of disposing of that property. And in the early 2000s, they actually struck an agreement with a local development company that would take ownership of the property and oversee the environmental remediation of the land.

The entire parcel is 9,000 acres of land and it's very good land for a large scale industrial development to take place. And that's why the Army selected it, because the land is relatively flat, it's central to the country, it has good access to regional transportation hubs, has good access to utilities, power and water and sewer services. So, there was always a recognition in the community that if that land could ever be

cleaned up and returned to productive use, that there was a significant opportunity for large scale jobs generators in the area.

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And that wasn't lost on the mayor or the council or us here at City Hall. We've been in close coordination with that developer over the last 20 years and making sure that the property gets cleaned up, environmentally remediated to a level that is that is safe and healthy for the community but also redeveloped. And the economic development opportunity that was there is one we wanted to capitalize on.

So, more recently, the city annexed that 9,000 acre parcel and created some tax incentive mechanisms that would attract a large development. Now, we didn't in our wildest imagination think that it would be the largest economic development project that has ever occurred in the state of Kansas—$4 billion capital investment, 4,000 jobs. It's estimated that it will generate $2.5 billion in economic activity for the region annually, and that is a mind boggling number.

PIPA: Despite the size of this project, and all of the development that will come with it, Mayor Walker remains optimistic that De Soto can remain the tight-knit, small town that it currently is. He wants to protect the integrity of the town, similar to what we heard earlier this season in Thomas and Davis, West Virginia.

WALKER: You know, this opportunity, it's more than just De Soto. This is a regional opportunity. We've spoken earlier about the number of jobs that were out at the Sunflower ammunition plant when it was during the peak production times. And those jobs ranged upwards to 20,000 people. So, and at that time, De Soto was a town of, you know, when the plant first started, was maybe six or 700 people. And at our peak, we've never been more than, you know, we are today. I don't think we were ever bigger than the 6,300 that we are today.

So, people have commuted to this area to fill many of those jobs over the over the years. And we would expect that would continue. That there are a million-and-a-half people in the workforce within 30 to 45 minute drive of this facility. So, we're anticipating that a lot of those, some of those people will want to live in the community, but some of those people are already in places where they want to continue to live and will drive to our city, commute either through transit options that we can create because of this project or through their car as through the transportation network that that is already established.

So, the jobs and that that two and a half billion dollars in economic activity is going to be spread throughout this this region. So, it's a regional benefit for all of us and we are at kind of the center of it and the ground level. But it's going to impact the entire area.

PIPA: What's exciting for Mike Brungardt is that this project promises jobs that will allow the residents of De Soto to remain in their hometown and be part of the middle class.

BRUNGARDT: That's really what motivates me and why I am so, so excited about this opportunity. For the community to sit for at least a generation or two generation and wait and wonder and worry about what's going on at the Sunflower plant, it's almost like a like a coal community in Appalachia, maybe where the coal company came in and brought in outside resources and made the economy and made the whole made the whole thing work. And then they left.

And now this is an opportunity for us to make this our own. This isn't outside money and outside forces coming in. This is our own organically based economic development engine that will fuel the next generation.

That's why I think, and the mayor I know understands this and our council understands this, and the region in general understands this, that too many Kansans have been having to leave Kansas once they get their degree or the diploma to find these to find these wages—for too many for too long that's happened. We want to be a jobs hub. We want people to come back. We want people to think about De Soto and the Kansas City area when they're thinking about building a life.

And that's really what it is for me. It's re-onshoring of those of those career jobs that have that have left the country over the over the last generations. It's quality of life benefits for our residents. And, oh, by the way, it's in a green industry that's expanding massively and will be here for generations. This is not a flash in the pan. This isn't a gold rush. This isn't an oil boom. This is a generational opportunity to be part of the solution that the whole world finds ourselves in with global warming and solution to a small part of the solution to that problem. That's what excites me about it.

PIPA: For Mayor Walker, it just strengthens the future of De Soto in so many ways.

WALKER: I'd just like to re-emphasize Mike's comments. And what I've shared a lot in different conversations I've had with people is that this is a generational opportunity. This is key because we know that the next generation of De Soto kids, they can come back and work. They can come back to this. They can stay in De Soto. They don't have to leave. And that's what is going to make this such a great project. It resets the stage for our city going forward and helps us create this diverse tax base that we will have for that next generation to continue to build this city into a great place to live.

[music]

PIPA: For De Soto, this is generational—not, as Mike says, a gold rush or an oil boom.

From De Soto we keep traveling west, all the way out to the "Lost Sierra" of northern California, where I talked with Greg Williams. This *is* a place that has direct experience with the gold rush.

WILLIAMS: Yeah, my name is Greg Williams. I'm a founder and executive director of Sierra Buttes Trail Stewardship. And we're a 501(c)(3) nonprofit based out of Quincy,

California, and operating in the homelands of the Miwok, the Nisenan, the Maidu, the Paiute, and the Washoe Tribes. Yatahey.

Yeah, so, we're in northern California, north of Truckee and Tahoe in a region that we call the Lost Sierra. And it got that name basically from a mail route that existed during the gold rush. And, the mailman got lost, no doubt, and coined this area as the Lost Sierra. And it's a place that we kind of use that term. We've been basically, like, disinvested in, I guess you would say, for generations now.

The jobs have traditionally come from logging and mining, resource extraction. And those industries are gone or, like, have slowed down quite a bit, or, like, the logging industry has been mechanized to the point that people aren't just going out with axes and cutting down trees and creating all these jobs.

And our region is about 70% national forest, with the with the national average being around 8%. So, we rely on partnerships with the national forest to create jobs and have an economy here.

PIPA: It was the miners who, in an indirect way, led Greg to mountain biking and the stewardship of historic trails that are now central to the renewal and well-being of a whole network of small towns in the area.

WILLIAMS: Yeah, so, my heritage is northern Sierra Miwok, the Deer Creek Band. My people have been here for 10,000 years. And miners, when they discovered gold in the area of Nevada City, displaced and massacred my tribe. And my great-great-great-grandfather fled north up into a place called Downieville.

And I grew up knowing about this place Downieville. And as a teenager, my parents bought me a mountain bike. And so, I started exploring a lot of the same trails. And became Downieville's first professional mountain bike guide in 1991. And started working with the Chamber of Commerce there as gold miners were starting to leave and the loggers were starting to leave.

And so, we created an event called the Downieville Classic, which this year is going to be the 25th anniversary of this world-class mountain bike race that really showcases the trails and recreation in Downieville.

Then in 2001, we had a really big winter, pretty similar to what we're having now. A lot of water, a lot of snow, a lot of wind and a lot of trees were down. And so, I was under permit with the Forest Service and basically said, hey, we need to get some trail crews out there and open this trail system up so that we can have tourism this year. And they let me know that their budget had been severely cut, they weren't going to have a trail crew, and that I was going to have to, like, step up and help.

And so, I knew at that moment I was going to be more than just a mountain bike guide, I was going to be a steward of the land. And so, over the next couple of years, I took my

profits and I poured them into creating a nonprofit, which is called Sierra Buttes Trails Stewardship.

PIPA: Greg explains what that stewardship means, both for the health of the communities and the entire region.

WILLIAMS: We're here in the Lost Sierra, and part of that is, like, a loss of pride, a loss of opportunities, a loss of population.

We're in the business of revitalizing mountain communities, and we use trails as a tool to be able to do that. And what I mean by tools is that we're able to basically support severely disadvantaged communities through job creation for youth and for adults. And then also create new job opportunities and business opportunities in these places that have relied on resource extraction for generations now.

We're also at the headwaters of the largest watershed of the whole Sierra Nevada, the Feather River watershed that delivers 65% of California's clean drinking water. So, even if you don't live here in the Lost Sierra region, you're very dependent on us taking care of this place and making sure that that the water is clean and that the forests are healthy.

We also want to create a learning landscape for cultural and outdoor education programs for adults and for kids. You know, for a lot of people they come to public lands, their first time on public lands might be on a trail. So, we have an opportunity to really educate them about the importance of public lands and about shared stewardship. And ultimately, we want to have good times with good people.

So, the idea here is, it's a project it's called Connected Communities, and it's funded through a state organization that's called Sierra Nevada Conservancy.

[music]

And they're using proposition funding to help support our efforts. And so, this project, Connected Communities, it's funded to bring resiliency into these communities to keep people here and to attract people. And the idea is to connect 15 mountain towns with multiple use, singletrack trails so people can hike or bike, ride their horse, go from one town to the next. And really drive an economy into the main street of the town.

So, if we can start to bring back people, working families, into this region, and create opportunities for new businesses to open, or for the businesses to exist, to actually, like, thrive. And then for us, in terms of employing people, like, house-buying jobs, like, with wages where people can afford to buy a house, they can afford to contribute to their community. Go out to eat. Fully, function, raise their family here. That's what we're hoping recreation is going to bring to us.

PIPA: Like many of the rural towns that I visited for the podcast, Greg and these Connected Communities are using their heritage and their history as a portal for new economic opportunities for their residents.

WILLIAMS: And so, just those real, true stories about the people I think is really important for those that maybe don't live in rural America, but maybe come here on vacation to just realize, like, what the people that are living there are going through and just have a greater appreciation.

And ultimately, you know, just say hi to people and be nice.

PIPA: Greg gives us a wonderful note to end on, because that is what I hope this podcast has offered to you, our listeners: a window into the realities of rural places across America and the people who live in them, through stories they tell about their successes, challenges, and experiences.

To offer a human connection—however virtual—that is often missing from the sweeping narratives generally offered by the media.

[music]

And to catch a glimpse into the innovation, leadership, and entrepreneurial spirit that happens throughout rural America every day—and that opportunity to just say hi.

It's been a pleasure to capture these snippets from Lovington, Brattleboro, De Soto, and Quincy today. Thanks for the suggestions!

And remember to let me know your thoughts about whether we ought to continue *Reimagine Rural* for a second season, and what you've found most compelling or appealing about the podcast. Email me at GlobalMedia at Brookings dot edu.

Until then—I'm Tony Pipa, and this is *Reimagine Rural*.

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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 Reboredo, 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.

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*.