



February 6, 2012

Meeting Minutes

The second meeting of the Georgia Rural Development Council was held in Atlanta on February 6, 2012. The morning session was held at the Georgia Department of Agriculture and the afternoon session was held at the Freight Depot. The meeting began at 9 a.m. and concluded at 2:15 p.m.

**Members of the Council present** at the meeting are as follows: Gary Paulk, Pat Graham, Dwayne Turner, Jason Winters, Bebe Heiskell, Tom Thompson, David Cook, Matt Cardella, Dewey Robinson, Billy Jackson, Charlton Rogers, Buddy Leger, Ed Jordan, and Richard Harrell. Ex-officio members in attendance are as follows: Mike Beatty, Commissioner of the Department of Community Affairs and Kevin Clark, Director of Georgia Environmental Finance Authority. Homer Bryson represented Mark Williams, Commissioner of the Department of Natural Resources. Also present were Nancy Cobb, Executive Director of the OneGeorgia Authority and the Georgia Rural Development Council, Saralyn Stafford, Assistant Commissioner of the Department of Community Affairs and Director of the Rural Policy Center, and Laura Meadows, Dennis Epps, Walt McBride, and Anna Boling, all of the Carl Vinson Institute of Government, UGA. Todd Long, Georgia Department of Transportation; Dr. John McKissick, University of Georgia; and Sydne Smith and Jack Spruill, Georgia Department of Agriculture made presentations throughout the day on various policy issues which will be the focus of much of the council's work.

Nancy Cobb moderated the meeting. **The first order of business was to elect the Vice-Chairman of the Council.** (The Council serves at the pleasure of the Governor who acts as Chairman of the Council.) N. Cobb called for nominations from the floor. Buddy Leger nominated Jason Winters. The nomination was seconded by Bebe Heiskell. There were no other nominations, and **Jason Winters was unanimously elected to serve as Vice-Chairman of the Council.**

Following the election of the Vice-Chairman, N. Cobb introduced the first two speakers of the morning, Sydne Smith and Jack Spruill of the Georgia Department of Agriculture. J. Spruill made a presentation on the "Georgia Grown" logo. A new logo with a simple, highly recognizable design was recently developed as part of a renewed effort to support, advertise, and promote the use of Georgia grown or locally grown products throughout the state. Along with the development of the new logo, the Department of Agriculture is working to find ways to enhance the value of this label. It is hoped that the logo will become something that all producers, marketers, and distributors of Georgia grown or locally grown products will want to use. This program is still in the development stages, but ideas for sustaining it include charging memberships fees and attracting corporate support in the form of sponsorships. In return, members, their products, and sponsors will be promoted on the Georgia grown website or perhaps in a directory used by consumers. Also, the labels possibly could be found on menu items in restaurants or on food items sold in major market grocery stores. There are other ideas for the use of the label as well. N. Cobb asked how a restaurant or grocery store could learn about this program and



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how to be involved in it. J. Spruill said he hoped to have Department of Agriculture staffers devoted, in part, to marketing the program. N. Cobb observed that the council members represent all parts of the state and asked how they could help. J. Spruill commented that perhaps they could help disseminate information, but that the Department hopes to promote the program online. Commissioner Beatty commented that if the council could develop good policy around this issue, he felt the members of the council could promote the program through the regional commissions.

Following the presentation by J. Spruill, S. Smith made a presentation on a recent labor survey conducted by the Department of Agriculture. Four thousand surveys were sent to agriculture producers, processors, and other individuals in professions related to agriculture. There were 813 respondents which represented 136 counties (86.6% of all counties in the state) and were largely reflective of Georgia agriculture both in terms of commodities produced and farm size. Much of the response focused on the federal H-2A legislation dealing with the federal guest worker program. The surveys indicated that the H-2A legislation is burdensome and cumbersome to farmers needing to hire farm workers. The responses also reflected a shortage of farm workers and a strong need for a viable guest worker program in the state. In this regard, S. Smith reported that Georgia Attorney General, Sam Olens, has determined that federal law does not permit state creation of guest worker programs. With all of these factors considered, it is the position of The Department of Agriculture that the solution to the problem with the federal guest worker program lies with reform of the H-2A legislation. (Senator Chambliss has introduced a bill that reworks the H-2A legislation. Other bills have been introduced as well.) The Department also recommends improving and expanding education and outreach to the agriculture industry about state and federal labor recruitment programs, and solution oriented research on these and related issues.

Gary Paulk commented that under H-2A, migrant workers are in a better position than are domestic workers. He said that H-2A is not a viable solution for farmers, and state legislators who passed House Bill 87 do not understand this issue. (HB 87 is an immigration reform bill passed in the 2011 session of the Georgia General Assembly which many farmers say frightened away much needed migrant farm workers.)

Commissioner Beatty asked about the likelihood of the proposed bills being passed into law. S. Smith said this was unclear.

Dewey Robinson commented that the migrant worker issue will be worse this year. He said that it must be corrected or farmers will begin reducing the amount they plant and prices will skyrocket. S. Smith said that the state legislators are hearing about this issue, but the challenge for them is that most



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people are generally in favor of House Bill 87. Buddy Leger added that there are plenty of legal migrant workers that will not come into the state to work because they do not want to be harassed.

Jason Winters asked if the Department of Agriculture looked to see how neighboring states were dealing with this problem. S. Smith responded that the agency had done so. She also said that there will be more information about what is happening with the bills that have been introduced following congressional hearings scheduled for February 9, 2012.

Following S. Smith's presentation, N. Cobb introduced Todd Long, Director of Planning for the Georgia Department of Transportation. In doing so, she reminded the council that they had identified transportation as the number one issue around which strong policy favorable to rural Georgia needs to be developed.

T. Long's presentation focused largely on transportation funding issues. He began by saying that funding for transportation is an investment in infrastructure which is a good strategy for growing the economy. He went on to say that much of the funding for transportation derives from the federal level, but the current revenue stream is insufficient. One thing that is impacting this revenue is that less gas tax is being collected due to improvements in gas mileage and a reduction in miles being traveled. T. Long reported that other states supplement their transportation funding by assessing fees for certain services. Georgia does not do this. He speculates that gas tax will be stable going forward, but prices will increase, and outlays will exceed income.

In comparison with other states, Georgia is third from the bottom in spending on transportation, and its freeway system has not been have not expanded in the past 30 years. Yet, Georgia is one of the fastest growing states in the nation. Further, transportation needs far exceed available funds. One method of dealing with this issue in Georgia is the transportation sales and use tax which is levied by virtue of the Transportation Investment Act passed by the Georgia General Assembly in 2010.

Funds collected as part of this tax are broken down into two parts. Generally, 75% goes into a regional pot and is used for projects chosen through a selection process using regional roundtables. The other 25% goes directly to the counties where the tax is generated to be used for transportation projects in those counties. The formula used for distributing funds from this tax is beneficial to rural counties.

T. Long concluded his presentation by talking about Georgia Department of Transportation delivery rates. Many of the projects are locally driven. Also, a high percentage of the projects are within budget and are delivered on time.



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Jason Winters commented that it is difficult to explain DOT or “road” projects to the general public. There is not a consistent message from county to county. People hear different things, and they are confused. It was pointed out that the Vinson Institute has an online tutorial about the Transportation Investment Act which can help in this regard. The tutorial can be accessed at [www.cviog.uga.edu](http://www.cviog.uga.edu).

Following T. Long’s presentation, all those present adjourned to the Freight Depot to take part in Leadership Day. Following lunch, the council and others present at the morning meeting reconvened at the Depot for the afternoon session.

The presenter for the afternoon session was Dr. John McKissick of the College of Agriculture and Environmental Sciences at the University of Georgia. The focus of Dr. McKissick’s remarks was on economic vitality indicators (EVI).

He began by stating that the reason for calculating an economic index is to evaluate and prioritize. Otherwise, it is difficult to determine if an economy is moving in the right direction. For the purpose of the Georgia Rural Development Council, he said comparisons should be made in Georgia (county by county), and Georgia also should be compared with the Southeast and the United States as a whole. Further, progress or the lack of progress should be studied over a period of time. (The time frame used for Dr. McKissick’s presentation is 1980-2009.)

EVI indicators at the county level (for comparing county to county within the state) include per capita income, population, poverty rates, unemployment rates (by residence), employment rates (by job location), and wages. Also, this data can be indexed against the southeast and the United States. In this way, the Council can get a good picture of how Georgia is doing economically. (Dr. McKissick reviewed a number of slides which illustrated the economic situation in Georgia over the past several years.)

Dr. McKissick also encouraged those present to look behind the data to learn more about what happened in the places that showed progress as well as what happened in the places that did not. In other words, he encouraged the group to look at the factors that resulted in economic progress or the lack thereof.

Commissioner Beatty recommended that the council look at how the rural counties were impacted during the time frame referenced by Dr. McKissick. He also pointed to a regional map within Dr. McKissick’s presentation and commented that it showed interesting change from 1980-2009. He went on to say that this data could help explain what happened from region to region within the state.

M. Cardella asked Commissioner Beatty if there was a guide for writing policy. Commissioner Beatty observed that the council cuts across all spectrums and represents many sectors. He said the members



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have the influence they need in their respective regions to put good policy in place. He encouraged the council to identify flawed policy and get rid of it. He further encouraged the council to look at the data, find the success stories, and determine how to replicate the success stories through the development of good policy.

M. Cardella commented that the council had identified 10 priority issues and wondered how it could get focused on what it really needs to accomplish. Commissioner Beatty responded by reminding the group about the items that came to light during the Governor's recent "competitiveness initiative" and the things Dr. McKissick had talked about. He said that it was this information that provided the indicators of what needed to change. He said the council needed to look at the four or five things that needed work. Then, it needed to come up with specific recommendations to address these issues.

Dr. McKissick encouraged the group to look at the data and ask how Georgia can make itself more competitive. He suggested that the council consider the importance of manufacturing and agriculture in Georgia and how to improve the economic climate for these industries. He reiterated the comments of Commissioner Beatty regarding the influence the council members have and their ability to get good policy in areas where change needs to be made. This thought was underscored by S. Stafford.

Commissioner Beatty spoke about the comments made by the Governor at the Leadership Day luncheon. He said the Governor's remarks were inspiring and that the Governor understands the change that needs to be brought about through the council. He said the council should work to make the Governor successful in this regard. He commented that some federal legislation gets pushed along because of an entitlement mentality. He asked, "how do we break this? Instead of offering a safety net, how do we offer a ladder out of poverty?"

Dr. McKissick closed by reiterating that the Council needs to look at Georgia against the Southeast and the entire United States to see where it has done well and where it has not and why. He reminded the group that they can lead, but they need to lead in the right direction. He said the data will guide the way and that the council needs to look at places where improvement has been made and look to see why it happened.

S Stafford told the group that Dr. McKissick's EVI report would be disseminated to the council members.

At the conclusion of Dr. McKissick's remarks, Jason Winters, Vice-Chairman of the Council, closed the meeting. He acknowledged that all of the council members are from areas where there are problems. He referenced his own county which had a 17% unemployment rate when he took office. He said the unemployment rate is now 11%, and even though that rate is high, it shows great improvement. He said he went to existing industry and asked what they needed in order to stay where they were. He



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encouraged the group to look at existing industry and to work to create an environment in which those industries can be successful. He further acknowledged that being on the council felt overwhelming, but

said that the council would find the things on which to focus. He commented that he would like for the council to have a mission statement and would like to see a website developed. Also, he said he wanted the council to look at some places in the state that are doing well and learn how to market what we have.

He said that the focus of the last two meetings had been on the “negatives,” but rural Georgia is important and there are many positives. He said that there are good and unique stories, and the council should focus on them as well. Also, he suggested that the council add health care resources, youth retention, and other resources for rural Georgia as issues to consider. He commented that two of the largest gas deposits in the southeast are in Georgia. He said this is an untapped resource that could bring a lot of money and other resources into the state. One last suggestion was to divide the priority issues established by the council among its members so that, individually, they each could become “experts” on their respective topics (in order to guide policy making efforts). He concluded by saying that the Governor, the Lt. Governor, and the Speaker all have roots in rural Georgia, and because of that, the council has a real opportunity to get good things done for the rural parts of the state.