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NEWS

Rural Wisconsin ailing from workplace issues, a lack of housing and broadband

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Wisconsin's new Office of Rural Prosperity says low wages, housing shortages and lack of high-speed internet access are among the issues faced by small towns and sparsely populated areas across the state.

Wednesday, the office created by Gov. Tony Evers under the Wisconsin Economic Development Corp., released a 100-page report from the Blue Ribbon Commission on Rural Prosperity, based on 22 meetings with rural stakeholder groups, public comments and virtual listening sessions attended by more than 400 participants.

Even in a divisive political climate, there were many things people agreed on, said Kelliann Blazek, director of the Office of Rural Prosperity.

In fact, the pandemic cast a light on issues that have been around for a long time.

Among many things rural stakeholders told the commission:

Places like Door County face major challenges with housing for families living on low wages. There's also a lack of housing in agricultural communities.

“An affordable 100-year-old farmhouse with no insulation is no bargain in Wisconsin winters,” the report said.

The cost-of-living in small towns was also questioned.

“The assumption that everything costs less in rural areas is just that: an assumption,” the report noted. “People often pay more to buy necessities like groceries and gasoline in rural places because local vendors themselves pay more for low-volume orders and higher shipping costs — plus, there is less competition.”

Bigger employers, such as school districts, colleges, hospitals and government, provide anchor jobs offering higher wages, health insurance and retirement benefits. Other jobs in rural communities, including ones in important and growing categories like tourism and recreation, tend to be lower-paid, part-time and seasonal.

“Rural workers often must cobble together three or four jobs just to cover necessities,” the report said.

The lack of high-speed internet was a common theme throughout the topics including education, health care and the loss of young people in rural communities.

About 43% of rural Wisconsinites lacked access to what's called "broadband," internet speeds of at least 25 megabits per second for downloads and 3 megabits for uploads, according to a 2019 report from the state Legislative Reference Bureau.

Scores of rural communities remain stuck with internet speeds that lag cities by more than a decade, if they have access at all.

If it's not the No. 1 issue, "it's got to be close to it," Gov. Tony Evers said in an interview.

The pandemic has magnified the reality that broadband is as essential as any utility, and that much of rural Wisconsin is not well connected.

“When rural broadband is lacking or insufficient, schools and businesses have little recourse except to risk their students, customers and workers’ health by operating onsite or shutting down altogether. ... Discrimination and poverty add to this challenging mix. Tribal communities, immigrants and communities of color across rural Wisconsin disproportionately lack broadband access,” the report said.

“Without adequate broadband infrastructure, it is difficult to retain and attract young workers who require internet access to live and work in today’s digital world—and that difficulty will only grow.”

Dozens of Wisconsin counties have seen a population decline in the last decade, and almost all those counties are rural.

It creates a host of problems for communities as fewer homes are built and the tax base shrinks. If rural communities fail to address the issue, they won’t have the financial resources to pay for services an increasing number of elderly residents will require.

Rural counties often have difficulties funding their schools, which have substantial fixed costs but receive less state aid when student enrollment declines.

"We need to rebuild the economy in rural Wisconsin and we cannot continue to lose people, young people in particular," Evers said.

Restoring the state's commitment to provide two-thirds funding for public schools, which was generally in effect from 1997 to 2003, was an idea the commission said merited a further look. Increasing the Department of Public Instruction's Sparsity Aid program, which provides funding specifically to rural school districts, was also on that list.

Mental health was also one of the topics that came up in the meetings.

"Many rural stakeholders raised deep concern about rural residents—from youth to farmers to veterans to the unemployed and more — who are suffering from mental illness and emotional trauma. For example, farmer suicide is on the rise and needs special attention and resources," the report noted.

"Stakeholders also underline alcohol and drug abuse, including the addiction to opioids that has plagued the nation in recent years. These problems persist and are growing in rural areas, especially those that offer less opportunity to make a good living. With a shortage of rural social workers, therapists, psychologists and pediatricians, families are often forced to wait extremely long periods of time or drive long distances to get appointments with the necessary health providers for drug treatment and mental health concerns."

Worker shortages were another issue cited in the meetings.

"Rural Wisconsin's population is significantly older, on average, than in its metropolitan centers. As a result, workers are retiring and fewer youth are coming into the workforce to backfill their jobs — something that's especially true in some key industries like agriculture, forestry and manufacturing," the report said.

But rural life can make it hard to retain or recruit workers.

"A major barrier for many adults who want to work is the shortage of affordable, high-quality child care. The lack of decent, affordable housing stock also discourages potential workers from moving to where rural jobs are — and can drive workers with young families to search for a home and job elsewhere," the report noted.

"Pay is a special challenge for recent graduates more likely to have solid technology skills; rural college students graduate from college with the same level of debt as metro counterparts, and many in fields like health care and IT find it nearly impossible to service that debt without relocating to a metropolitan area where wages can run 50-100% higher than comparable jobs in rural areas."

Among the commission's 10 recommendations was that needs and priorities of rural and Native American communities be a "forethought rather than an afterthought."

There should be an "all-of-government approach" to doing right by rural and tribal communities, the commission said.