Introduction
There has been a convergence of thought on the need for an effective rural policy. Practitioners, researchers, and policy makers alike are coming to understand that there must be a “New Social Contract” for rural America if communities are expected to survive. Notions under discussion include that rural is more than agriculture, that the vitality of the country resides in the complex interdependence of rural, suburban and urban, and that innovation and solutions are derived from local minds.

So what does the “New Social Contract” look like? How do practitioners, researchers and policy makers leverage all types of resources for effective action? How do we accomplish an examination of the impact on rural America as policies are being formed?

In conjunction with the January 2002 Marketplace of Ideas, Minnesota Rural Partners, Northwest Area Foundation, the Center for Rural Studies at UND, and conference sponsors, implemented the ruralpolicyforum.org’s process to gather the grassroots voice in North Dakota. The process involved both a structured, online discussion and an online survey that was available for input prior to, during and after the event.

Expectations of the process varied to include opportunities to:
- gather data on communities’ perception of existing gaps and barriers, as well as tools and resources needed for communities and individuals to thrive;
• hear the rural North Dakota voice / consensus on what current conditions are and what needs to be done with rural policy to ensure the rural community survival; and
• gather data for aggregation in an effort to build a national grassroots, rural voice.

Online Discussion
The online discussion, which ran from mid-December through mid-January, poised ten questions. Participation was excellent and respondents offered an amazing variety of articulate and sometimes colorful stories. Summaries of the discussion commentary are provided below. The exact text of respondents is still maintained on the ruralpolicyforum.org website.

Question 1: How important is it that rural communities survive? Why invest in rural America? In rural North Dakota?

Most of the persons who responded believe it is critical that rural communities in North Dakota and rural America survive. There were multiple mentions of the traditional culture in rural communities, their historic importance in building the nation and pride in the work ethics and resourcefulness of rural people. Even more evident was respondents’ beliefs that without rural communities and the resources (people, commodities, natural resources) they provide, urban and suburban communities would not survive. The future of all communities will be inextricably impacted by the health of rural communities. Respondents were also aware that perhaps only rural residents themselves, believe rural survival is critical. Finally, respondents indicated the need for investment in new economy businesses, investment that will bring the rural environment to a level competitive with larger communities, and the development and encouragement of young entrepreneurs. Solutions for investment and the investment itself must come from rural communities.

“As we lose our young people to larger cities out of state through out-migration and we lose our elderly to up-migration, we become that much more desperate in the small, rural communities to survive.”

“Say you've grown up in rural Pingree, North Dakota. Say you love the countryside and just have to be around grain bins. Say you can't live without 20-below winters and those wonderful January ice storms. Where're you going to work?
The local elevator? The cafe that's going broke? The implement dealer that folded 20 years ago. The neighbor farmer who'll pay you minimum, then fire you when the harvest is done? OK, you can buy a house cheap, but who's going to take if off your hands when you're ready to move up or out? How far do you want to drive for groceries? You want to commute 90 minutes each way in mid-winter just to get to work?

500 channels of satellite TV can’t overcome the fact that you're economically knee-capped right out of high school. And if you’re a male personage, where are you going to find a mate who's willing to live in that wonderfully cheap house out in the middle of nowhere just so she can get a clear view of the Aurora Borealis or chase wild bunnies with the likes of you?

We’re asking taxpayers elsewhere to fund initiatives in our area when potentially big investors who already live here are shipping most of their investable capital to Scottsdale, Cabo San Lucas, etc., or buying blue chip corporate bonds and other non-rural investments.
**Question 2:** How are our public policies keeping pace with the changing rural economies? If not, why?

All of the respondents indicated that public policies are not keeping pace with the changing rural economies. There was a recognition that as people moved out of rural areas, the votes in congress have moved out as well. Major issues cited include transportation costs, service and goods needs decline caused by implementation of CRP, and policies that encourage provincial interests to compete for public dollars. One respondent feels that rural economies are being decimated by public policy. “Public policy, as embodied in the farm bill, where the necessary starvation level subsidies are maintained to make the small farmer exodus slower and less noticeable to the Nation, are accelerating toward a “termination policy”; by failure to address targeting of subsidies toward family farmers, by failure to address payment limitations to curb use of the subsidies as farm enlargement subsidies, and failure to embody a completion title in the farm bill to at least start a process of reversing the monopolistic practices that lead to lower prices and the need for subsidies to start with. Lack of adequate policies in everything rural from Medicare reimbursement to railroad consolidation and line abandonment are failures of public policy at the most fundamental levels, and that speaks to a termination policy.”

**Question 3:** What are the service gaps and barriers to creating and/or sustaining vital, rural communities?

- Isolation, particularly in western North Dakota
- Lack of venture capital in North Dakota; little investment in new business and ideas of local people
- Lack of support or interest in developing young leaders and current leaders inability to listen to the voice of youth in North Dakota.
- Housing
- Need for rural communities to stop competing and work together
- Unfocused on support to strengthen and maintain existing businesses

**Question 4:** What policies and projects have worked in your rural community?

Respondents wrote about communities developing a sense of identity, independence and self-reliance. The need for strong leadership, awareness and broad community input were also stressed. Several organizations and programs were also identified: rural business incubator at UND; USDA nutrition lab in Grand Forks; rural telephone and electrification initiatives of the 1030's 40's and 50's; Bank of ND student loan program, Northern Plains Sustainable Agriculture Coalition, Northern Crops Institute, Indians into Medicine, Northwest Area Foundation, and MN’s Ag Utilization and Research Institute.

- “We were able to start a small technology company which has grown from 10 employees to over 40 since 1997, and we have recently added a web design and software development division. This company is actually owned by three non-
profit entities in the community and is being used as a business incubator. The profits stay with the company to help increase the wages and benefits for the employees, as well as acting as a business incubator for new technology businesses.”

- “We have an active Job Development Authority group and an advisory group to the city coordinator who act as a sounding board for various projects. It really does take a community that is committed to moving forward and taking some risks in order to develop projects that can show potential growth and help the community to survive.”

Question 5: What resources and tools are needed to maintain and revitalize the quality of life in our rural communities?

The most frequently mentioned resource was local venture capital. “If the big guns here aren’t willing to put their investable dollars into local ventures, why should we expect outsiders to do more?” Other tools and resources identified include:

- Reward community initiative; those communities with strong leadership and a sense of purpose.
- A network of development services that could be accessed through one web site or one government department.
- Local quality healthcare and training for healthcare occupations
- Mechanisms to enlist and support youth leadership that move beyond historical methods that have little value for the youth and eventually turn them away.
- “We need both a national and state energy policy that aggressively promotes the development and use of home-grown energy.” (wind, fuel-efficient vehicles, ethanol, bio-diesel, and financial incentives for energy conservation)
- Rural areas must work together and develop their own plans for sustainability.

Question 6: What do you think is the most effective use of the public funds in rural North Dakota?

Overwhelmingly the most effective use of the public dollar was investment in infrastructure. The broadest sense of the term applied: water, sewer, roads, medical and emergency services, education, and housing. This investment in infrastructure was mentioned as a tool to develop new business and encourage entrepreneurs. Public funds utilization should include input gathered in non-traditional ways and take a step out of the bureaucracy in place.

Question 7: What are the important priorities for rural education?

Respondents pointed out that over 80% of North Dakota school districts have student populations of 600 students or less and are continuing to face declining enrollments. Critical to facing these challenges is the notion of sharing expertise and facilities between districts. Among the tools to be utilized are teacher attraction incentives, professional development, educational opportunity access through
technology and developing new sources of funding for modernization of facilities. There must also be support for current education programs at the federal level that help rural communities: E-Rate, OZABs, Preparing Tomorrow’s Teachers to Use Technology, and incentives for students planning to teach in rural communities.

Question 8: What are the unrecognized or self-employment opportunities of your community?

- Marketing finished products as opposed to raw goods or commodities – market to the consumer
- Entrepreneurial minds exist, they just need the local environment/culture to be supportive.

Question 9: What public outcomes should a rural policy try to attain?

- “Healthy (social and physical) lifestyle and economically viable family units.”
- “Young people with energy, staying or coming home to the rural areas, and finding a way to comfortably survive and raise a family.”
- Review recommendations made at the Great Plains Population Symposium (Oct '01)

Question 10: What would rural policies look like if developed to:

- Redefine and restructure the rural-serving college and university so as to increase human capital in sparsely populated and high poverty rural areas.
- Create new market demands and linkages so as to increase regional competitive investments in urban periphery and sparsely populated areas.
- Develop and use new technology to overcome remoteness to create infrastructure that expands competitive advantage in sparsely populated and high poverty areas.
- Encourage immigration to rural communities to increase human capital in sparsely populated and high poverty areas

Responses to this last question varied greatly. There were suggestions that policies:

- Reimburse resettlement services paid by employers for refugees and immigrants;
- Reward higher education for rural development efforts that work;
- Ensure adequate infrastructure in rural communities;
- Assist entrepreneurs and allow failure; and
- Recognize the outmigration distress measures of low-poverty and low unemployment for small communities to ensure eligibility to government and private philanthropic funding programs.
Event Survey

An online survey was launched January 7, 2002. The survey contained twelve questions requesting that respondents provide their opinions on rural North Dakota, rural America and policies that provide an impact on rural communities. Six hundred-eight (608) persons responded to the survey during the Marketplace of Ideas event and while the survey was available online through February 2002.

The survey was similar to one implemented in July 2001 at the International Summit on Community and Rural Development in Duluth, MN and identical to one implemented in conjunction with the November 2001 conference, Rural Idaho: Challenged to Change, held in Caldwell, ID.

Question 1 attempted to evaluate broad themes.

As in Duluth and Idaho, respondents overwhelmingly agreed that rural areas must diversify their economies to survive. Eighty-five percent (85%) of the Marketplace respondents strongly agreed or agreed with that statement. Ninety percent (90%) of the Idaho survey respondents strongly agreed or agreed with that statement. With the Duluth survey, ninety-one percent (91%) of the respondents agreed that rural economies must diversify.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Farm policy must recognize its relationship to a wider set of rural development issues.</td>
<td>5% (31)</td>
<td>14% (83)</td>
<td>40% (278)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. It is important for rural areas to diversify their economies to survive.</td>
<td>6% (39)</td>
<td>3% (19)</td>
<td>9% (57)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Natural resource based industries play an important cultural and economic role in rural areas.</td>
<td>4% (26)</td>
<td>4% (22)</td>
<td>12% (75)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Federal government must help local leadership build the community infrastructure they need for successful rural development.</td>
<td>4% (27)</td>
<td>10% (63)</td>
<td>21% (130)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. State government must help local leadership build the community infrastructure they need for successful rural development.</td>
<td>4% (25)</td>
<td>4% (26)</td>
<td>14% (86)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Significantly smaller percentages of respondents in North Dakota and Idaho survey agreed or strongly agreed that federal (61% ND, 63% ID) and state (75% ND, 74% ID) must help local leadership build the community infrastructure they need for successful rural development. Eighty-six (86%) percent of the Duluth survey respondents agreed with that same statement.
The chart below provides a survey to survey comparison of the three Rural Policy Forum convenings.

**Question 1 - Evaluating Broad Themes**

- State govt must help local leadership build community infrastructure
- Federal govt must help local leadership build community infrastructure
- It is important for rural areas to diversity if their economies are to survive
- Farm policy must recognize its relationship to a wider set of rural development

**Questions two through four asked respondents to prioritize a set of issues and identify necessary resources and actions for rural community revitalization.**

As the table on the following page illustrates, respondents believe the three most important issues for rural communities are (1) employment opportunities to keep youth in rural areas (49%), (2) quality of schools (36%), and (3) opportunity to earn an adequate income (30%). Following these issues closely are providing good career opportunities to young workers (29%), need for economic diversity (26%), access to health care (26%), and difficulties in the agricultural sector (23%).
The top three issues differed slightly from North Dakota to Idaho and Duluth. The graph below provides an illustration. Duluth survey respondents responded much more strongly to developing and retaining businesses locally. (The Duluth survey did not include the statement “employment opportunities to keep youth in rural areas” or “opportunity to earn an adequate income”.)
Rural development policy faces many challenges. In North Dakota, respondents identified the relationships between rural, suburban and urban (resources, jobs, people, etc.) as the most important issue (30%).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The SINGLE most important issue that ALL involved with rural development policy face is (check one):</th>
<th>Number of Responses</th>
<th>Response Ratio</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Competition between economic development and natural resource/ environment</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural areas are underserved in critical areas, such as health care services and telecommunications infrastructure</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Change in a rural community often threatens the &quot;character&quot; of the place, including traditions, locally-owned businesses, and its sense of unique history</td>
<td>113</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Declining natural resource-based industries and lack of economic diversity in the rural economy</td>
<td>128</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationships between rural, suburban and urban (resources, jobs, people, etc.)</td>
<td>175</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Other, (please describe below):</strong></td>
<td>41</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>593</strong></td>
<td><strong>100%</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

While not surprising distinctions from North Dakota, the Duluth summit respondents felt that the most important issue for rural development policy was that rural areas are often underserved in critical areas such as health care services and telecommunications infrastructure if market forces are left to their own devices. Thirty-six percent (36%) selected that issue as most important. In Idaho, respondents identified the declining natural resource-based industries and lack of economic diversity as the most important issue (35%).

**Question four asked respondents to identify resources and actions needed to maintain and revitalize the quality of life in rural communities.**

The item selected most was progressive leadership at state, local and national levels at 40%. State and federal policies that encourage investment in next generation markets for natural resource-based industries (29%) was second and the involvement of youth in community planning, administration and maintenance (28%) was third.

In Idaho the item selected most was progressive leadership at state, local and national levels at 48%. Active community planning and zoning strategies (32%) was second and vision (30%) was third. (Question four was not included in the Duluth survey.)

The table on the following page illustrates the North Dakota responses.
Question five asked respondents to identify the top stakeholders that would be represent their interests in a dialogue about rural development.

Respondents were allowed to check up to three stakeholder categories. As can be seen in the following table, nearly half of the respondents felt that farmers (48%) would best represent their interests. Rural residents was the next highly selected stakeholder at 41%.
Questions 6-12 asked demographic information about the survey respondents. Tables detailing demographic characteristics of respondents follow. Key characteristics of respondents include:

- Seventy-seven percent (67%) were participants of the Marketplace of Ideas in Grand Forks, January 2002.
- Thirty-seven percent (37%) of respondents were between the ages of 45-54; while 24% were under the age of 25.
- Sixty-six percent (60%) were male and thirty-four percent (40%) female.
- Eighty-seven percent (87%) of the respondents were from North Dakota (MN-10%, SD-1%, Manitoba-1%)
- Twenty-three percent (23%) of the respondents represent communities under 500 population. Twenty-six percent (26%) of the respondents represent communities between 500 and 2,499 population.

The participants of the North Dakota survey were much younger than those that participated in Minnesota or Idaho. Only 3% of Minnesota’s over 350 respondents were under the age of 25. In Idaho the survey took place on the Albertson College campus and about 6% of the respondents indicated that they were under the age of 25. The four tables on the following page provide demographic information on the North Dakota Marketplace Rural Policy Forum respondents.
When asked to identify which industry or sector respondents best represented, twenty-four percent (24%) selected farmers. Many selected other, however, and the repeated other responses included:

- Entrepreneurs;
- Students;
- Small business owners;
- Rural youth; and
- Churches.
Summary / Conclusions

What does this information tell us? What is the significance? Process participants made it evident that policy must change to be efficiently responsive to changing and local rural economies. There was agreement that policy rooted in an historical context and traditional development processes were no longer valid or valuable. Perhaps it is the information age, which makes the proliferation of knowledge faster yet sometimes overwhelming, but the development of policy without a thoughtful examination of its impact on rural communities is outdated. In many circumstances, vertical decision-making is harming rural communities.

What to do? It is clear that effective policy must be created with rural stakeholder input. Policy that fits and creates an environment for rural community revitalization is possible. It is also clear that solutions and innovation cannot be handed to communities. Local minds that are already engaged in innovation and have been sustaining rural communities for decades can be role models. Local and regional leaders with vision and understanding of the impact of policy, rural communities or market development must be cultivated as rural policy is developed. Resources that already exist must be leveraged.
With the Rural Policy Forum in North Dakota, the answers of so many young people tell us that value must be placed on the involvement of youth in development, retention and planning efforts. The value must be real to the young people and purposeful by the organizations and systems that engage them.

Organizations and individuals engaged in developing rural policy must include residents from urban and suburban areas in the effort. The folks who responded to the survey and participated in the discussion already understand why investing in rural America is important. Instead of “preaching to the choir,” as consensus on the need for a rural policy is reached by rural practitioners, researchers and policy makers, the discussion must be elevated to a broader base. An effort must be made to increase the understanding on the interdependence of rural, urban and suburban economies. Outreach, education, and inclusion must become a mantra for those advocating for rural policy development.

Rural Policy Forum Partners
Marketplace of Ideas 2002

Center for Rural Studies, UND
Minnesota Rural Partners
Northwest Area Foundation
North Dakota Department of Agriculture
Senator Kent Conrad