



Rural Virginia Prosperity Commission

Briefing Paper

September 19, 2000

Rural Affairs Study Commission A Report to the General Assembly of the Commonwealth of Virginia, 1971¹

Staff Note: *The report from 30 years ago indicates many of the issues the Rural Virginia Prosperity Commission of 2000 will be addressing are not new. This briefing paper captures the highlights of that report. Complete copies are available to anyone upon request. Contact Karen Mundy, Department of Agricultural and Applied Economics (0401), Virginia Tech, Blacksburg, VA 24061; 540-231-9443; or karenm@vt.edu.*

The Rural Affairs Study Commission 1971 Report was the second of two reports, the first of which was presented in 1969. The 1971 Report provided the Commission's final recommendations for alleviating Virginia's rural-urban imbalance. Recommendations were classified under the three policy sectors: *Human Services*, *State Development*, and *Natural Resources*. Most recommendations for encouraging population and economic growth in nonmetropolitan areas called for changes in laws and increases in responsibility for existing local and state government agencies which would require increased funding to implement. The Division of State Planning and Community Affairs was made responsible for semiannual progress reports regarding the status implementation of the Commission's recommendations.

In the Report's "Summary and Recommendations" section, the Commission noted that the rural-urban imbalance would disappear when equality of access to services that support a satisfactory life-style was provided to all areas. *Human Service* policies included community services, education, and health services. Community services included access to basic water and sewage facilities, cultural opportunities, libraries, and occupational education. Cultural opportunities were to be made available by hiring additional art and music teachers. Additional culturally based teaching materials would be a new responsibility of the Commission on Arts and Humanities. Their role would expand to include developing and implementing a plan for cultural

enrichment throughout the state. Public library services were to be made available to every citizen through additional state funding.

Recommended changes and educational policy, in general, were expected to address the finding that the quality of schooling in rural areas was lower than in metropolitan areas even though rural and metropolitan residents spent the same percentage of their income to support education. The Commission called on state government to adopt a policy statement that "no child should be disadvantaged by lack of access to quality education merely because of where he was born." They recommended using school facilities for community-wide educational projects. They also supported changes in legislation that would provide specialized programs through regional educational cooperatives. These legislative changes would need to be accompanied by new laws protecting school boards from tort liability and enabling cooperatives to receive state matching funds. Finally, the Commission recognized the need to heighten the acceptance of occupational education as a means of providing skilled labor for the industrial sector. The Commission recommended additional funding to construct facilities specifically for occupational education and to provide vocational counseling and placement services in secondary schools.

The Commission, finding that medical services were unevenly distributed throughout the state, proposed a

¹ D. Woodrow Bird, Chairman. The Rural Affairs Study Commission Report, 1971. *Rural Affairs Study Commission: A Report to the Governor and the General Assembly of the Commonwealth of Virginia*. (Richmond, Va: 1010 James Madison Building, 109 Governor Street).

regional approach for delivering health-care services in rural areas. Facility increases would be matched with adjustments in programs that trained practitioners. Such adjustments included increases in enrollment and scholarships for those who were interested in pursuing needed specialties such as family practice and who were willing to work in geographically underserved areas. Other adjustments included increasing paraprofessional training programs and changing the laws relating to the legal liability of the supervising physicians and their assistants. Finally, a joint educational effort by health and educational agencies would be undertaken to achieve consumer health awareness in the areas of illness prevention and early entry into appropriate health-care facilities.

Recommendations for *State Development* policy included improving the highway system, eliminating substandard housing, evaluating the complete range of tax structure relationships, strengthening local government by abandoning the unique situation which creates cities wholly separate from counties, and encouraging the employment of an administrator for each county. Secondary road improvements would be focused in “slow growth” or “no growth” areas and would be accompanied by education for County Boards of Supervisors regarding the process for allocating funds. The Commission found that more than two-thirds of substandard housing was located in rural areas; improved housing conditions were recommended. To acquire sufficient public resources, fiscal resources were to be studied to provide possible alternatives to the real property tax revenue base.

The Commission called for additional funding and research to facilitate the better management of Virginia’s *Natural Resources*. The Soil and Water Conservation Commission would maintain responsibility for providing the leadership and coordination needed to resolve Virginia’s shoreline erosion problems. The Agricultural Opportunities Development Program would continue to be funded. Finally, a state land-use study commission was recommended to assign responsibilities for long-range land-use plans. At the local level, all counties were urged to develop long-range land-use plans and adopt subdivision regulations and zoning ordinances.

To ensure that future water resource needs would be met, the Board of Conservation and Economic Development and the Commission recommended creating a study commission to provide strategies for the implementation of better water resource management policies. To help prevent the depletion of usable ground, legislation would be enacted to protect the ground table within an area. Responsibility for coordinating the funding of water storage and flood prevention facilities would rest with the Conservation, Small Watersheds Flood Control and Area Development Fund.

The Commission stated that “A basic need for achieving rural-urban balance is to have **private initiative in combination with government** mobilize the resources necessary to ensure that the recommendations of this Commission are carried out” (emphasis added, p. 18). The Commission believed these changes would attract and retain residents in rural areas.

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