



# Letters to Texas

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## NON-URBAN RURAL OUTREACH PLATFORM PROPOSAL

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### NON-URBAN RURAL OUTREACH (NURO) PROPOSAL FOR POLICIES TO ADDRESS REVITALIZATION OF RURAL COMMUNITIES AND AMERICAN AGRICULTURE

The Texas Democratic Party must focus on the needs of rural communities. If we are to again become a competitive political force in our state, we must put policies in place to win back the voters in the rural areas of Texas. The Texas Democratic Party should become the incubator for new policies to address the challenges of the 21st century, and one of the greatest challenges is how we confront and remediate the crisis in rural America generally, and Texas in particular.

What is needed is a bold political agenda that addresses the issues plaguing rural America today. The following is a set of policy initiatives designed to restore economic opportunity in the small towns and rural areas of our country and create a new frontier for the farmers and small businesses that populate them.

Following are some of the major problems facing rural Americans, problems that demand policy initiatives:

- **Stagnant labor market**
- **Lack of access to affordable education, including skills and technical training for 21st-century jobs**
- **Lack of available and affordable healthcare**
- **Increasing environmental challenges**
- **Attacks on property rights of private landowners**
- **Aging public works infrastructure, including roads, bridges, and water systems**
- **Lack of a robust telecommunications infrastructure (i.e., Internet and cell phone service)**
- **Agriculture credit crisis**

**A New Approach to Opportunity** Access to credit is the lever that can lift the rural economy out of the crisis created by the effects of globalization and technology. We recommend establishing a Rural Economic Loan Insurance Corporation. This corporation would guarantee up to 90% of loans and grants made by regional banks to residents of counties having populations less than 300,000, to accomplish the following purposes:

- Enable individuals to purchase farm machinery and equipment, lease and purchase farmland, and finance crop inputs to enable young farmers to start their own operations.
- Enable individuals to create new farm-to-table food operations.
- Fund public and private projects to enhance Internet and cellular service in rural areas.
- Encourage individuals and businesses to develop renewable energy sources.
- Enable small businesses to open innovative companies to use available local resources in new and different ways, and create competition in an increasingly global economy.

**A New Approach to Education** The state legislature has failed to provide the funding required to make a reality our constitutional right to robust, free public education. Education statistics in Texas, measured either by scores on standardized tests or by graduation rates, have been on a steady decline.

We must provide access to universal, affordable child development/childcare programs and pre-K education.

We support a system that would provide every parent with the means to send his/her child, from 3 months to 4 years of age, to approved childcare centers. These centers would continue to employ the early childhood techniques, such as the Success by 6 model, which have proven successful. These types of universal pre-K programs should be approved by all state education agencies.

We support programs like the “Communities in Schools” program, which is based on the concept that communities can reduce the number of high school dropouts by identifying and working with students who are having problems in school, at the earliest age possible. Once identified, the students have the opportunity to join the program, in which hired staffers and volunteers work with them to increase reading and math skills – or to help them with discipline, health, or emotional problems caused by poor nutrition, parental abuse, or other such external factors.

We propose the establishment of a Youth Corps to instill the benefits of public service in new generations and to provide resources for rural improvement programs. Where possible, existing programs such as Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA) could be leveraged. Teenagers between the ages of 13 and 18 would form a demographically diverse “corps” of youth from all areas of a region. The program would be designed to mix them culturally to break down prejudices and social barriers – and to have them achieve goals together as a team.

The staff would focus on instilling the values of courage, commitment, cooperation, and community. At the end of the program, participants would receive a paycheck, as well as assistance from the community in finding jobs. This approach has a proven record of success in communities in which the results have been measured – improving grades, reducing juvenile delinquency, and enhancing the personal esteem of the participants in the programs.

Every region of the state should establish Regional Technical Training Centers at community colleges, designed to teach students the skills needed to obtain jobs in the 21st century. The State should make tax funds available to the coalition of school districts proposing to create these training centers.

### **A New Approach to Health Care**

Rural citizens face different health issues than people in towns and cities. There is limited access to health care in the remote areas of our state. People living in rural communities must sometimes drive hundreds of miles to obtain basic medical services. Emergency care is nonexistent.

Because it can be hard to obtain care, health problems in rural residents may grow more serious by the time they are diagnosed. People in rural areas of the United States have higher rates of chronic disease than people in urban areas. They also have higher rates of certain types of cancer, from exposure to chemicals used in farming.

Nearly 1 in 5 children in the United States resides in a rural area. Compared with their urban cousins, children living in rural areas often experience worse health outcomes. Children living in rural areas have higher rates of obesity, tobacco exposure, and chronic medical conditions than do urban children. Rural children are also more likely to live in poverty, have unmet medical needs, and rely on Medicaid for their health care.

Further, individuals with special needs or in need of long-term care face a complete void of resources to address their problems. Parents of children with mental, behavioral, and developmental disorders in rural communities more often reported having financial difficulties, and rated their own mental health or their partner's mental health as "fair" or "poor." The children with mental, behavioral, and developmental disorders are entitled to better access to mental and behavioral healthcare, programs that support parents and caregivers, and opportunities to learn, play, and socialize.

Finally, in rural communities there are few, if any, facilities that address the needs of elderly people in need of home health assistance. Elderly people in rural communities must rely exclusively on assistance from their children or other relatives.

We support acceptance of Medicaid expansion by the Texas legislature. This action will return \$114 billion of federal taxes paid by Texans and close the coverage gap for 1.69 million Texans. This will provide significant improvement of access to care for rural Texans, especially children, and provide needed funding to rural hospitals and other medical providers.

We support a national initiative to address the scarcity of health care resources in rural America. This initiative would involve funds and grants for programs that would do the following:

- Provide special health care grants for rural communities to incentivize health care professionals to locate in rural communities and open special facilities designed to provide the services needed for rural areas.
- Use technological advances, such as telehealth, to reduce problems in accessing care and seeking expert consultative care in rural areas.
- Encourage a fundamental shift in our health care delivery system by moving from a "sick care" to a "well care" model of service focusing on each citizen being provided the most effective and affordable care.
- Recognize that health care is a fundamental right, not a privilege.

### **A New Approach to Environmental Challenges**

You cannot separate rural Texans from their land. It is part of their heritage, and they depend upon it for their livelihood. Caring for the land is innate in rural Texans, and when the land, air, or water is threatened, rural Texans know it first. As Texas grows and becomes more urban, increasing demands are placed on land needed for agriculture, water supply, extraction of natural resources, and recreation. Increases in rural environmental challenges harm the ability of Texans to prosper.

The population of Texas is expected to increase more than 70 percent between 2020 and 2070, from 29.5 million to 51 million. According to reports prepared by the Texas Water Commission, in 2020 irrigation will account for 51% of water demand, municipal usage 28%, and manufacturing 12%. By 2070, while irrigation falls to 36% and manufacturing increases only slightly to 14%, municipal demand will jump to 39%. This clearly illustrates that all Texans have a stake in protecting rural water resources.

Other resources are also facing threats. The spread of suburbs is removing more and more land from agricultural production, and the reduction in property sizes is harming the ability of wildlife, including game animals, to thrive. Increased aggregate mining produces traffic, noise, and dust, and further reduces spaces for wildlife. Counts of wildlife species, such as quail, are dropping, and pollinators, including bees, are in decline. These few examples lead us to propose the following actions to the State legislature to mitigate and control these harmful impacts:

- Assist rural Texans in increasing water supply by promoting rainwater capture and erosion control programs. Polluted water decreases the supply for people, livestock, and wildlife, so the legislature should address threats to water quality caused by industry, development, mining, and agriculture.
- Update laws regarding aggregate and frac-sand production and fossil fuel extraction and transportation to reemphasize the importance of protecting the environment lest we spoil land used for other purposes, such as agriculture, recreation, and raising families.
- Review regulations impacting the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality and the Texas Railroad Commission authority to emphasize protection of the environment and provide the tools necessary to do so.
- Update Texas eminent domain statutes to balance the rights of individual property owners with those of industry, and to impose clear conditions on private entities that are assigned the right of eminent domain.

### **A New Approach to Address Aging Public Infrastructure**

In 2017, the American Society of Civil Engineers gave Texas a C- grade for the state of its infrastructure. Factors causing this poor grade include the following:

- Over the next 20 years, Texas needs an estimated \$8.76 billion to upgrade drinking water infrastructure.
- We have 1,411 dams rated as “high hazard.”
- Twenty-four percent of our roads are rated as being in “poor condition.”

Rural Texans often have the greatest needs, but sparse populations make it difficult for these areas to raise the funds for large capital projects, such as wastewater treatment plants, dams, and new road construction. Promises of federal infrastructure investment have not materialized. Meanwhile, rural Texans suffer from the lack of public infrastructure needed for economic development, causing a continuing decline in rural population. We call on the Texas legislature, public institutions, and informed citizens to work together and create partnerships to solve these problems.

### **A New Approach to Resources and Technology**

- Repeal state statutes prohibiting the growing and selling of marijuana
  - Replace the Rural Electrification Administration with the Rural Energy, Technology, and Communication Commission to do the following:
- Provide capital loans and grants to electric and telephone cooperatives to build infrastructure for broadband, high-speed Internet service in rural areas.
- Provide Wi-Fi capabilities in rural towns and school districts.
- Incentivize expanded cell phone service to fill the gaps in coverage that are now prevalent in rural areas.
- Encourage hydro-electric, solar, and wind electric generation.
- Encourage entrepreneurship and creation of small businesses.

### **A New Approach to Governing**

We must return local control and allow local governments to establish the means to address local needs and priorities. We should also embrace regionalization with a priority state and federal political organization on “Culture is Economy,” and “Economy is Culture,” meaning that people who reside in specific areas in which their livelihoods are tied to particular economic industries should be encouraged to join together and promote their own unique cultures and economies – and not be divided by artificial boundaries imposed upon them by the state or federal governments. Therefore, we call for the following changes to State statutes:

- Restore representative government by restructuring institutions around regions of the state.
- Provide for online and same-day voter registration.

- Mandate that state and federal legislative districts consist of geographic areas having mutual economic and cultural characteristics.
- Pass a constitutional amendment that mandates the creation of an independent, bipartisan panel to provide for redistricting following the results of each census.

### **Call to Address These Challenges**

There is much work to be done, but the promise of economic growth by a revitalization of the rural areas of Texas is worth the required public investment. We propose that the legislature form a bipartisan commission of legislators, local officials, farmers and ranchers, business owners, educators, engineers, and healthcare practitioners to study these rural challenges and make recommendations for rural revitalization programs. The charge to the commission would include identifying needs and priorities, specific programs to address those needs, and recommendations for funding from every source that benefit from a prosperous rural Texas. We also urge that the commission be given a specific and urgent deadline to complete this work.

### **Summary and Conclusion**

We have outlined in this paper some policy initiatives which hold the promise of reviving the pioneer spirit and positive outlook of the people who populate rural America. These policies provide the attention that rural areas need and deserve. By implementing policies that promote opportunity and generate hope, we will attract rural votes that can become the margin of victory in statewide elections.

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