

Rural Texas is the state’s foundation. And it’s in jeopardy.

Downtowns are deserted, hospitals are closing, teachers are leaving. Every part of life in rural Texas is harder — but it’s worth saving.

BY **POOJA SALHOTRA, JAYME LOZANO, NIC GARCIA** AND **ALLISON P. ERICKSON** NOV. 7, 2022 5 AM CENTRAL



Vehicles pass through Dublin in Central Texas on March 25, 2021. 📷 Evan L’Roy/The Texas Tribune

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Pastor Alan Pollard often looks out the front window of his church and sees a bulky fixture he once thought could help him spread his gospel far and wide.

Instead, the AT&T fiber box has become a daily reminder of the church's inability to access broadband.

"The connection is so bad that it interrupts the service," said Pollard, who this year became pastor of Bethany Word of Life Tabernacle in Tyler, one of the largest cities in East Texas. "It's hindering us from getting the message of God out to the world."

Pollard is one of many Texans frustrated at the lack of high-speed internet access. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, 2.8 million Texas households lack broadband access. The problem disproportionately impacts rural communities, where a low population density dissuades private companies from setting up broadband infrastructure.

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In the cluster of counties of northeast Texas where Pollard lives and works, less than two thirds of households have high-speed broadband, according to the state's broadband development office, and those who do have access pay high prices. Residents of [Deep East Texas](#), which includes 11 rural counties such as Angelina and Newton, pay on average four times more for internet services compared with those in the Dallas-Fort Worth metro area, according to a 2019 [analysis](#) by Ericsson.

That rural Texas is largely unable to connect with the rest of the world by high-speed internet is illustrative of a long-standing divide that now threatens the very way of life that is foundational to the state as a whole.

The Texas Tribune will [host a Nov. 17-18 event in Lubbock](#) to examine issues including broadband access, economic development, education and health care.

Rural Texas, along with the food, fiber and other manufacturing goods it exports, generated more than \$21.2 billion for the state's economy in 2019, according to the Texas Almanac. Cattle and cotton are the state's leading exports. Along with

oil and gas, tourism, and the public sector, the rural economy is a sizable chunk of the Texas economy.

Put another way: Rural Texas helps put the food on your plate, the clothes on your back and the gas in your car. Oh, and some of the coolest and most beautiful places in Texas couldn't be farther from downtown Dallas or Houston.

"The state of Texas needs rural," said Kara Mayfield, executive director of the Association of Rural Communities in Texas. The association supports rural communities with education and partnerships among rural counties, cities and economic development groups. It also advocates for its members at the Legislature.

"The whole state suffers if rural Texas disappears," Mayfield said. "We'll be relying on other states or foreign entities to fill the void that used to be filled by our very own Texans."

The global demand for crops — especially cotton — and beef is expected to increase between now and 2031, the U.S. Department of Agriculture predicts. If Texas cannot stabilize its rural communities, it stands to lose its place in the world economy.

City and county leaders, Mayfield said, are not waiting for state lawmakers to act — though they are eager to work with lawmakers to find solutions to help sustain and grow rural Texas for generations. In the meantime, they're using federal COVID-19 relief money to reinvest infrastructure and refocusing on retail and tourism to attract city slickers to their revitalized downtowns and communities.

"Rural can figure it out," she said. "They just need people to work with them."

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As a result of the pandemic, a historic investment in broadband

Counties and local economic development groups have been advocating for state and federal funds to pay for broadband infrastructure for years. But it wasn't until the COVID-19 pandemic forced students and employees to work from their own homes that the issue of rural broadband access came under the national spotlight.

Congress took action last year through the bipartisan infrastructure bill, which included a historic \$65 billion investment into broadband infrastructure. The American Rescue Plan Act also committed more than \$25 billion to invest in affordable, high-speed internet.

Local governments across the state are itching to get those funds for their communities. Already, Texas has received the first round of federal funding, totaling \$500.5 million. The state's broadband development office, created through legislative action, is charged with setting up a grant application process to allocate that money.

"As we transition our daily lives to being online — whether it's your ring camera, education or your work — the digital divide has been highlighted," said Greg Conte, director of the broadband development office. As a result, Conte said, more funding opportunities have been made available for states pushing to democratize broadband access.

The 14 counties making up the East Texas Council of Governments — including Smith, Rusk and Cherokee — are each identifying three to five of the most critical broadband projects and the associated budgets.

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"It's really not about Netflix or streaming your favorite football game," said David Cleveland, executive director of the council. "The longer we've waited to address this issue, the more we've fallen behind urban areas from an economic development standpoint."

Cleveland said the lack of broadband connectivity dissuades companies from setting up headquarters in the region, which in turn takes away job opportunities.

While the East Texas council is taking a patchwork approach, another group of counties is creating a regional solution. The [Deep East Texas Council of Governments](#) has designated a team to design a fixed wireless network that, with enough funding, could provide internet to every household in a 12-county region, which is entirely rural and encompasses 373,000 residents.

The executive director of the Deep East Texas Council of Governments, Lonnie Hunt, said the model is like that of a nonprofit co-op, where customers who are more expensive to serve are balanced out by those who can provide a modest return on investment.

The project is already underway in Southeast Texas' Newton County, and Hunt is hopeful to secure additional funding to expand it across the region.

Downtown Fredericksburg on Aug. 15, 2022.

Downtown Fredericksburg on Aug. 15, 2022.  Eddie Gaspar/The Texas Tribune

To boost their communities, city leaders want to invigorate downtowns

Texas' population has grown faster than any other state, but that growth has been concentrated in urban areas — Houston, Dallas and Austin. More than half of all counties in Texas have lost population between 2010 and 2020, and those were exclusively in rural Texas.

Hunt, of the Deep East Texas Council of Governments, said rural areas should take a multi-pronged approach to spur economic development. That approach should include creating a plan to expand broadband infrastructure and restoring downtown to make the community more attractive to a young workforce.

Hunt said that Fredericksburg, a Central Texas town of about 11,000 and a tourism hub, can be a model for other small towns.

“They restored their downtown, and the next thing you know it’s a cool place to be,” said Hunt, who is from the East Texas town of Crockett. “Crockett could be the next Fredericksburg.”

In Lufkin, the largest town in Angelina County, a group of more than 75 volunteers is working to make downtown Lufkin a state-designated cultural district. If approved by the Texas Commission on the Arts, the district would be eligible for grant money to support arts-related projects.

“This isn’t just to beautify our city, but it’s about spurring economic development,” said Becca Chance, who is co-chairing the initiative to get the cultural district designation. “This is bottom-line numbers for our city.”

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One small town losing residents is Floydada, about 45 miles north of Lubbock. There’s been a consistent decline of Floydada residents — 11% over the last decade.

“We see that over time and it starts to weigh on us,” said Ryan Crowe, the city’s director of economic development.

Crowe said the board is working on rebuilding the community by looking at what kind of new businesses residents need and helping the ones already there.

The city aims to keep its downtown attractive. There are already several banks and restaurants. There is a museum and a print shop. Still, several buildings stand empty. Crowe envisions those empty spaces replaced with coffee and book shops.

“I would love to have something that gives people a reason to stay down there once they’re working on something,” Crowe said.

National teacher shortage is most acute in rural Texas

When Bill Chapman returns from Thanksgiving break later this year, he won’t just be the superintendent of the Gulf Coast’s Palacios school district. He’ll be head coach of the varsity female soccer team.

Like other rural superintendents across Texas, Chapman must find creative ways to fill an unending number of vacancies to maintain daily operations of a school district — inside and outside of classrooms.

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“It’s harder to find teachers,” he said, even physical education teachers who once “dropped from trees.”

Chapman — who previously coached soccer and football when he was a teacher — is taking over the soccer team after a social studies teacher left the district.

Among his staff in the 1,300-student school district he had left after last year, “I was the most qualified,” he said.

The teacher shortage is a national problem that is more acute in rural areas. Educators are leaving in droves for a variety of factors, including low pay and

burnout from the pandemic.

In Texas, certified teachers in smaller school districts, which tend to be in rural areas, leave their classrooms at a quicker rate than their peers in larger school districts, according to data from the state education department. Twenty-two percent of all certified teachers in school districts with fewer than 500 students quit their job after last school year, the state data found. Meanwhile, 16% of certified teachers in the state's largest school districts didn't return to their classrooms this fall.

Chapman said state lawmakers are not helping him keep teachers in the classroom. Excessive training requirements and legislation that suggests lawmakers "don't trust teachers to know what to say" on issues such as race is disheartening to teachers, he said.

"The actions of the Legislature over the last couple of sessions do not show teachers they're valued very much," he said.

While lawmakers did infuse schools with cash for teachers during the 2019 legislative session, leaders say it isn't doing enough for rural schools.

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"There are very few teachers making the big bucks," Chapman said.

State lawmakers also need to ease up on mandates, particularly on teacher training, rural education leaders said.

"When the Legislature requires training, you're taking teachers away from those classrooms, you're taking them away from their families," said Michael Lee, executive director of the Texas Association of Rural Schools. "They have to work twice as hard, either creating lesson plans for substitutes, subbing for other teachers and grading papers afterward."

And Texas must send more money to classrooms — especially to help enhance safety protocols after the Uvalde shooting that left 19 students and two teachers dead, Lee said.

“With the requirements post-Uvalde, they need some money to do this quickly instead of over time,” he said.

Rural hospitals hang on thanks to COVID-19 money, which is already running out

Hospital doors have shuttered in rural communities nationwide over the last decade, and no state had more hospitals close than [Texas](#). Two dozen rural hospitals have closed since 2005, leaving the people in those communities without easy access to medical attention. This has caused the loss of 880 fully staffed hospital beds, according to American Public Media Research Lab, with more and more people moving to the state every day.

Many factors are to blame for the rise in closures — people in rural communities tend to be poorer and older, Texas has the highest [uninsured](#) rate in the country, which means less people can afford to go see a doctor, or are going and unable to pay their bills. Texas also hasn’t expanded Medicaid or increased Medicaid reimbursement rates to hospitals. Health care experts estimate the state could [gain](#) \$6.3 billion annually if it was.

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Together, those issues often put hospitals in the red.

Hospital leaders anxiously awaited to see how many would close because of the COVID-19 pandemic, but surprisingly, there were no hospital closures in Texas that year. An influx of federal money gave hospitals life support. But those dollars were mostly gone by the time the Omicron surge hit at the beginning of the year.

“For the entirety of 2022, there’s been stress without funding,” said John Henderson, the CEO of the Texas Organization for Rural and Community Hospitals. “There’s been continued workforce challenges and staffing challenges, without any kind of offset in terms of payments.”

In the next legislative session, Henderson’s group will push for the Medicaid rate to be increased, instead of Medicaid expansion. Henderson doesn’t expect that to happen any time soon.

Wind turbines spin in Central Texas on March 25, 2021.

Wind turbines spin in Central Texas on March 25, 2021.  Evan L’Roy/The Texas Tribune

Climate change and new housing threaten agriculture

The rural areas of Texas are often filled with sprawling plains with one of the biggest moneymakers in the state — crops.

That wasn’t the case in much of the state this year. There were no waves of cotton or grain, just cracked, dry land for miles throughout the High Plains, which stretches from Midland-Odessa to the top of the Panhandle.

Record-breaking heat waves and a historically dry year led to crop failure throughout rural Texas.

The cotton industry alone — the cash crop of West Texas — will lose more than \$2 billion from the drought this year. Scientists have found that climate change is making droughts worse, so this could continue to be a problem in the future.

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“Having two or more consecutive years of drought starts endangering the viability of farms,” said John Nielsen-Gammon, the Texas state climatologist.

Nielsen-Gammon said it’s challenging for farmers, and especially ranchers, to bounce back after one bad year. The drought was causing a lack of forage for cattle in the Panhandle and East Texas, which forced some cattle producers to sell their herds in large numbers this summer.

“It takes several years to rebuild herds, it took nearly a decade after the 2011 drought,” Nielsen-Gammon said.

That is hard on producers and ranchers, but also has a ripple effect that hurts the wallets for everyone in the region’s economy.

According to a report from the International Center for Agricultural Competitiveness at Texas Tech University, thousands of people could lose their jobs and the economy could lose at least \$236.5 million in revenue.

“You’ve got several industries relying on agriculture, it takes just as long for the community to recover as it does the producers themselves,” Nielsen-Gammon said.

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It's only going to get hotter. And water will only be more scarce, experts say.

The southern and eastern parts of the state can expect temperatures increasing up to 125 degree days over the next 30 years according to a recent [report](#).

And there is a new wrinkle: Home developers trying to meet the demand for adequate, affordable housing are pushing into rural areas where building codes are simpler and land is cheaper. The influx of housing is expected to stress the water supply in these regions, said Jason Coleman, the general manager of the High Plains Water District, which helps manage the regions water resources.

Homes in new subdivisions have private wells that are pumping water daily from aquifers, large bodies of porous rock saturated with water. The new use for the state's underground beds of water is setting up a fight that will pit new development against one of the state's leading industries.

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What about your community are you most proud of?

What is the biggest challenge facing your rural community?

What creative action have you witnessed officials and private residents take to address the challenges your community faces?