

SOARing into a regional future in Appalachian Kentucky

This column is about good news, which, if all goes well, could become great news—for rural regions, agriculture, even urban America. It is about courageous leadership; reaching across political parties to forge bipartisan commitment to common purpose; seeking collaborative benefit beyond self-interest—be it firm, sector, organization or jurisdiction; aligning towns, cities, and counties in commitment to an asset-based regional innovation; and above all else, creating an envisioned rural future rather than reacting passively to the one which appears. As I assume you gathered, since none of this is evident there, this good news does not flow from Washington, D.C., but from the hollows of Appalachian Kentucky and the fertile plains of Nebraska.

Regardless of the Farm Bill Conference Committee outcome, I have little hope that USDA Rural Development will be able to enhance innovative, regional economic development programming. In fact, draconian cuts in Congressional funding for Rural Development over the past decade have resulted in very unfortunate missed opportunities to advance these possibilities. This lack of commitment to regional rural innovation is very short-sighted, and reduces our national economic growth, as well as the potential for greater prosperity in all rural families, including those who make their living in agriculture. I have written about this before in this column, and shared the data which clearly delineate this stark rural disadvantage.

This rural deficit will not be addressed, whether there is a budget deal or not, a sequester or not, a Renewable Fuel Standard utilization reduction or not, a SNAP funding cut or not, or a Farm Bill or not. And so it goes, in Washington, D.C.

But, as I promised two months ago, we now move to the environs of good news, where rural people and places collaborate to advance creative new approaches which inspire common commitments to a brighter future for the places they call home. Now, *this* is a great story, and one on which we will concentrate this column for the foreseeable future. We begin with two major new rural initiatives.

The SOAR Summit

On Monday, October 28, Kentucky Governor Steve Beshear and Congressman Hal Rogers, Chairman of the U.S. House Appropriations Committee, traveled to Hazard Community and Technical College, deep in the eastern Kentucky mountains, to announce a major new initiative they are co-sponsoring—the Shaping Our Appalachian Region (SOAR) Summit, to be held in Pikeville, Kentucky on December 9. Prior to the press conference announcing this Summit, they held the first meeting of the SOAR Planning Committee, who appeared with them at the media event. These fifty citizens of eastern and southern Kentucky, representing the diverse interests

and organizations which call Appalachian Kentucky home, were asked to create the Summit agenda, and support its way forward. In response to media questions, they all echoed a common theme—the SOAR Summit is simply the first step in a journey, not just an event.

These folks have been here before, many times. There have been countless commissions, strategic plans, and working groups designed to address the challenges in Appalachian Kentucky. Though all were well-intentioned, and most quite well done, the regional will necessary to move from words to action could never be sustained. Governors and legislative leadership changed, party powers revolved, the outlook for coalfield prosperity ebbed and flowed, and important initiatives fell by the wayside, as broader regional efforts were eventually destroyed by short-sighted and self-centered path dependencies, including those of local political elites fearing loss of power and control.

This time, Appalachian Kentucky has lost 6,000 coal mining jobs in the last 18 months, and everyone knows these jobs are not returning. Most of these were over \$50,000/year, breadwinner jobs, supporting families who have called these mountains home for generations. No crisis should ever be wasted, and this reality has focused the mind and heart of this region. As Congressman Rogers shared in passionate, thoughtful comments urging a move from “we and they” thinking to an “us” future, “this is about our soul.” When Governor Beshear and he speak about SOAR, you sense a deep leadership pact to support this new regional dialogue, vision, and



[Governor Steve Beshear and Congressman Hal Rogers sit down for an interview with host Jill Fraley to discuss SOAR “Shaping Our Appalachian Region.” \(YouTube video, 11 min., 31 sec.\)](#)



[Congressman Hal Rogers and Governor Steve Beshear encourage participation from the people of southern and eastern Kentucky in the SOAR initiative, “Shaping Our Appalachian Region.” \(YouTube PSA, 59 seconds\)](#)

plan of action, built by the region’s citizens, businesses, governments, and organizations. It is clear both men realize, if successful, this enterprise will not be fully achieved until they are long out of office. Here is a leading Republican and a leading Democrat standing together to serve as public champions for a new regional governance, which has eluded Appalachian Kentucky for decades. This will require generational commitments, of course, but the lasting legacy would be profound. SOAR is a perfect acronym for this effort, as this region must, indeed, “shape” its future. That is the essential first step in all successful regional innovation efforts, regardless of place or circumstance. And that is most definitely the critical first step in Kentucky.

This is a summit about regional ideas and innovations, which precede the hard work necessary to create the diverse economy and quality of place in which future generations in these mountains

can thrive. Not surprisingly, nearly 1,000 have already registered for the Summit, which will be broadcast throughout the region. (To register for the SOAR Summit, or follow its progress, visit <http://kydlgweb.ky.gov>.)

The coal crisis, of course, has been a huge factor, but this is about more than that. The commitment of these two public servants, as well as the amazing array of regional leaders who have agreed to work with them to frame and guide the regional discourse and future, is powerful and engaging. This has already done more to enhance the potential for true and lasting regional innovation there than any government program ever could.

There will be many naysayers, of course, because that is easy, and costs nothing. There is political risk here, and politics never takes a day off in eastern Kentucky. With our 24/7 news cycle, ideologues from both the left and right circle continually, and it may be possible to make political hay at the expense of this host of courageous, civic-minded leaders, risking a great deal to create a landscape-changing regional future. But, attacks could come from both the left and right, which could well mean the approach is just about right for most of the region's people, to be challenged at some political risk.

Time magazine suggested in its current issue that this is an effort other states need to keep an eye on. As Congressman Rogers offered in the interview above, "the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow may be less critical than the rainbow leading to it!"

I, for one, would not bet against the Governor and Congressman, and the many citizens who have already committed to support this regional effort. But, beyond that, I mainly would not bet against the Appalachian people. If the future of the place they love hangs in the balance, and if given half the chance for an honest opportunity to help, they will step up, and yoke up!

Next Month: The Nebraska Rural Futures Institute

A visionary Land Grant University President, Ag Dean, and lifelong agricultural leader are building a rural policy model other states and universities can and should emulate.