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January 26, 2024

The Honorable Gene Yaw  
Center for Rural Pennsylvania Chairman  
23<sup>rd</sup> District, Pennsylvania Senate  
625 Forster St. #902  
Harrisburg, PA 17120

Dear Chairman Yaw,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide written testimony and comment on rural population change. As McKean County Commissioner representing a rural county in Pennsylvania I hope to provide local perspective how change in population creates some unique challenges.

Prior to being elected County Commissioner, I was employed and owner of a small business in the trucking and excavating industry for nearly 30 years, I have raised 4 children, served on our local school board for 19 years while also serving on the Intermediate Unit 9 board for 8 of those 19 years. As Commissioner I currently serve on multiple boards and committees both locally and regionally.

In July of 2018 I attended a board meeting for Workforce Solutions for North Central Pennsylvania and was provided U.S. Census Bureau and Pennsylvania State Data Center projected population information for our North Central Region. Five demographic trends were reviewed to evaluate the future impact on workforce in the region and the likely change in demand for services due to the changes in those demographics. We reviewed implications involving housing, economic development, education, healthcare/human services, family, and community. Conclusions presented highlighted slow or negative population change caused by low birth rates and low in-migration; an aging population over 65; an aging labor force; also stating that reversing these trends in the short-term would be difficult. Within that report McKean County's projected population in year 2020 was projected to be 44,480 however McKean County has not recognized the stability in population as projected but rather a 2020 Census population of 40,432.

The most recent report provided by the Center for Rural PA contains valuable data and projections which we can incorporate into developing strategies to adapt to the changing demographics of our county and region to ensure needs of any particular group are not overlooked.

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated many rural challenges. As never seen before funding became available to counties during and after the pandemic it became apparent that county and regional partners lacked the capacity and specifically broadband projects lacked the technical expertise required. New strategies and partnerships were developed and we worked together to take advantage of various opportunities with existing county staff and resources. A better strategy and additional resources are most likely needed to be successful in administering any additional projects/programs with the requirements of the new funding sources available. Simply put, this creates new challenges in rural counties with limited workforce and community volunteers that are serving on multiple boards and organizations. Jim Chorney, Executive Director of North Central Redevelopment Commission comments, "The lack of investments exacerbates our challenges, impacting our region's ability to compete and attract individuals. Effectively addressing the multifaceted impact of rural population decline necessitates the implementation of comprehensive strategies, including economic revitalization, infrastructure investment, and community development initiatives."

The consequences of rural population decline are far-reaching and deeply concerning. One of the most significant impacts is the strain it places on the capacity of local government. With fewer residents, rural communities face challenges in generating sufficient tax revenue to fund essential services and infrastructure development. These challenges are not unique to local government. Agencies, partners, non-profits and businesses are also affected as essential local resources change or disappear entirely.

While data collection certainly provides valuable insights, I believe that incorporating real-life examples and stories can enhance the understanding and impact of the information. I have asked county employees, Ann Robinson, Economic Development Liaison and Dan Wertz, Human Services director to share some specific instances and narratives, to make the data more relatable to the capacity challenges and opportunities we experience.

There is no argument that broadband is essential and rural areas have been limited for far too long. Access to the internet is becoming increasingly important in daily life. Rural areas with limited internet access are finding themselves at a disadvantage for attracting jobs and younger residents, accessing important information, and participating fully in modern society. From an economic development perspective Ann comments "Since 2018, McKean County has been focused on broadband accessibility, availability, and affordability. Broadband expansion is critical to economic development in rural counties as one economic development strategy involves increasing the number of new or current residents who are taking advantage of remote work opportunities. If access to broadband is made available to rural communities, opportunities for remote work and increased access to critical educational and health services may tip the scale in many peoples' minds to move to the county. The County does not have a dedicated grant writer. That means that current staff are limited to part-time grant writing efforts because they are already addressing critical economic development, human services, planning commission, emergency services, and safety and security issues critical to the well-being of the county. Small rural counties, because of decreasing population, population density and how that translates to ROI, and lack of match, are caught in a Catch-22 situation and cannot submit a competitive grant proposal."

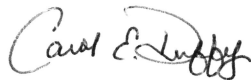
In an effort to collaborate and network Ann Robinson recently engaged community partners and formed the McKean County Economic Development Taskforce and reports, "The taskforce has worked to create a list of the most pressing issues within the county. It has identified basic human needs such as housing, education, utilities, food security, healthcare, and childcare as some of the most needed

services. Addressing these issues at a county level leaves fewer resources and staff capacity to meet the countywide needs such as economic development, workforce development, land use, transportation and infrastructure improvements, and quality of life factors. With population decline, a dichotomy is created between providing basic human needs and developing strategies for growth and development. The taskforce intends to take a look at this dichotomy to shrink the gap between the two realities.”

Challenges will continue and change as will the demographic landscape reflected in the recent data. County Human Service Director Dan Wertz expresses the opportunity within communities to come together. He begins his testimony as follows: “Our quality of life depends on a constellation and, complex interaction, of people, communities, elected officials, laws, government agencies, regulations, service providers, businesses, and civic and faith organizations, to name a few.” Highlighting our rural collaboration, he tells the story of a recent housing crisis in McKean County (this full story is attached). He ends with this statement. “We addressed the crisis. The causes remain. The number of community responders continues to decline. Yet, we have a huge opportunity. We have an opportunity to reexamine systems lifted by larger populations and to reinvest resources into community-driven action before the crises.”

While we face many challenges, the county continues to be responsive to the everchanging needs of the communities we serve and although population may be on the decrease the needs continue to grow. We look forward to working with all stakeholders to eliminate barriers and sustain our very precious quality of life in rural Pennsylvania. We appreciate all of those who are working diligently and hope to be a collaborative partner in Pennsylvania’s overall success.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Carol E. Duffy". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial "C".

Carol E. Duffy

McKean County Commissioner