

Center Board Announces 2023 Research Grant Awards

Congratulations to the recipients of the Center for Rural Pennsylvania's 2023 Research Grant Program. In December 2022, the Center's Board of Directors awarded five research grants, two to faculty at The Pennsylvania State University and three to faculty at the Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education (PASSHE) universities. Most of the research projects are set to begin on February 1.



“The Center’s Board of Directors, independent reviewers and Center staff are always mindful of the many issues that affect rural Pennsylvania and need deeper examination,” said Senator Gene Yaw, Center board chairman. “As the final stage in the grant review process, the board approves projects that will expand the Center’s database and offer potential policy considerations. As always, the Center looks forward to sharing the results of this research with policymakers and our rural residents and communities.”

2023 Research Grant Projects

Caring for Pennsylvanians with Dementia and Related Disorders: An Analysis of Needs and Capacity in Rural Areas, 2024-2034

Dr. Sara Grove, Shippensburg University of Pennsylvania
 The research team will conduct a comprehensive assessment of current services for individuals with dementia or a related disorder to project demand for services in rural areas of the Commonwealth through 2034. Through the analysis of population and demographic data, as well as interviews with agency staff and caregivers, the researchers will identify potential gaps in service provision, workforce demands, and funding streams. The team will also examine innovative programs and their funding sources
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Chairman's Message



In December 2022, the Center for Rural Pennsylvania Board of Directors held its quarterly meeting at the Gettysburg National Military Park Museum and Visitor Center in Adams County. Center Board Member Rep. Dan Moul hosted the meeting and provided us with an informational tour of Adams County.

During the visit, the board met with elected Adams County officials, Rep. Torren Ecker, whose district encompasses parts of Adams County, and tourism and county economic development representatives. We discussed a variety of issues affecting the area, including housing affordability, economic development, and agritourism initiatives, to name a few. The board then visited Hanover Shoe Farms, which is the largest Standardbred racehorse breeding farm in the world, toured Penn State Extension's Fruit Research and Extension Center, and visited Adams County Winery and Hickory Bridge Farm, to get an abbreviated look at the agriculture and tourism industry in the county.

The board also honored Pennsylvania Secretary of Agriculture Russell Redding for his leadership and service in agriculture and his steadfast support of rural Pennsylvania during his many years of public service. We appreciate all of his and the department's work to focus on such important issues as broadband access and availability, invasive species identification and control, and mental health awareness and services.

On behalf of the board and staff, thank you to everyone who has supported the Center and its work over the past year, and we look forward to working with you in the year ahead. Happy New Year!

Sen. Gene Yaw



Left to right: Rep. Eddie Day Pashinski, Center board vice chairman; Dr. Kyle Kopko, Center executive director; Sen. Gene Yaw, Center board chairman; Secretary of Agriculture Russell Redding; Shannon Munro, Center board member; Steve Brame, Center board treasurer; Richard Esch, Center board member; and Rep. Dan Moul, Center board member.

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employed by other states and nonprofit organizations for their applicability in the Commonwealth.

An Examination of Emergency Food Supply and Distribution in Rural Pennsylvania

Dr. Kristina Brant, The Pennsylvania State University
The research team will examine Pennsylvania's capacity to address food insecurity using a multi-methods approach. The team will first conduct a survey and interview with the state's 22 food banks, and will then select four to serve as case studies, which will include conducting site visits and interviewing local partners and clients. The team will identify gaps in food banks' supply and distribution chains, explore challenges reaching vulnerable populations, and trace similarities and differences across urban and rural areas.

Understanding and Addressing the Impact of Solar Development on Pennsylvania Farmland

Professor Hannah Wiseman, The Pennsylvania State University
The research team will explore the economic, social, and land impacts of existing utility-scale solar projects and potential future solar projects on Pennsylvania farmland. The research will employ four case studies highlighting diverse features of solar development. The research team

will also explore solar projects in rural New York—a faster growing solar market—to highlight concerns and potential solutions as solar deployment expands in Pennsylvania.

Baseline Assessment, Development Process, and Regulatory Context of Solar Power in Rural Pennsylvania

Dr. Claire Jantz, Shippensburg University of Pennsylvania
The research team will use Geographic Information Systems (GIS) mapping to assess solar development in Pennsylvania and the potential for solar expansion.

Connecting the Dots: Rural Public Libraries as Partners for Small Business and Rural Workforce Growth

Dr. Xiaofeng Li, Pennsylvania Western University Clarion
The research team will investigate the importance of libraries as partners in supporting small business development and workforce growth in rural Pennsylvania. The first phase of the study will use online surveys among librarians, and the second phase will include in-depth focus group interviews with key community stakeholders. The findings could impact future policymaking and contribute to the scholarly and professional conversation on small and rural libraries.

For more information on the Center's Research Grant Program, visit the Center's website at www.rural.pa.gov.

Recently Released Research

Distance Learning and Online Coordination of Service in Pennsylvania's Rural School Districts

What are some of the specific problems that rural school districts encountered during the COVID-19 pandemic? Recent research by Dr. Gerald LeTendre, Dr. Peggy Schooling, Hansol Woo, Meredith Bannon, and Josh Almes of Penn State University set out to answer that question. In addition, the research sought to learn how these districts responded to their unique challenges, and identify the policies, practices, and resources that are needed for Pennsylvania's rural schools to be better prepared for the next emergency that may close schools for an extended period.

The research included an examination of school district websites and planning documents, a survey of rural school district superintendents, focus group interviews with superintendents and Intermediate Unit executive directors, and a Delphi study of stakeholders, including parents, teachers, school board members, and administrators.

Overall, the research found that internet access was inadequate in rural districts, with more than 80 percent of districts having to provide hotspots for students. It also found that 1:1 initiatives, which provide each student in a given grade or school with a personal device such as a laptop or tablet, were insufficient, and that the pandemic increased the demand for mental health services.

An Analysis of Pennsylvania's Children

Dr. Rhoda Joseph of Penn State Harrisburg used secondary data from multiple sources to present a short analysis of Pennsylvania children (ages 0-17) over the 10-year period of 2010-2019. The research analyzed trends pertaining to children along seven different dimensions, including location, demographics, economic circumstances, education, health care, health, and behaviors.

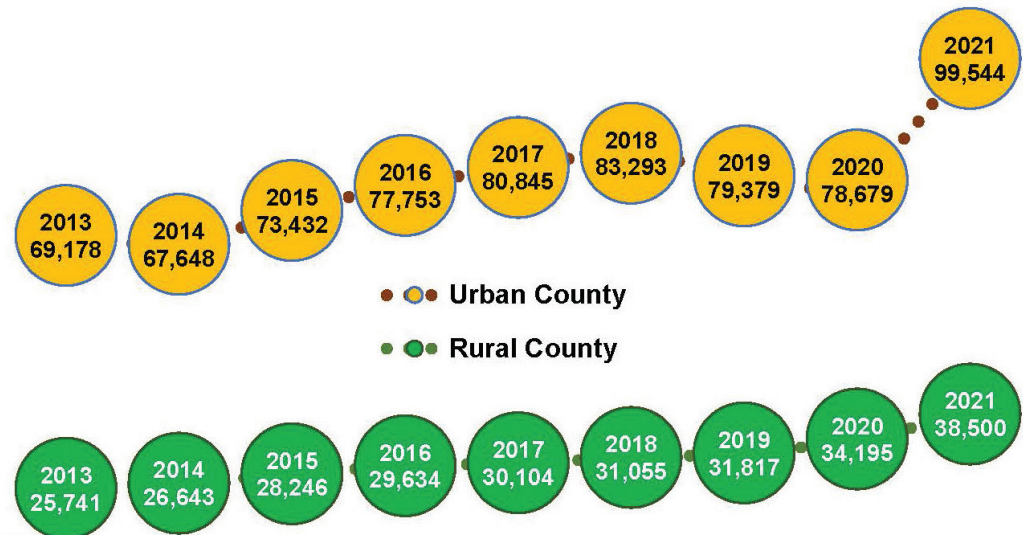
Both reports are available on the Center's website at www.rural.pa.gov/publications/research-reports.

Rural SNAPSHOT

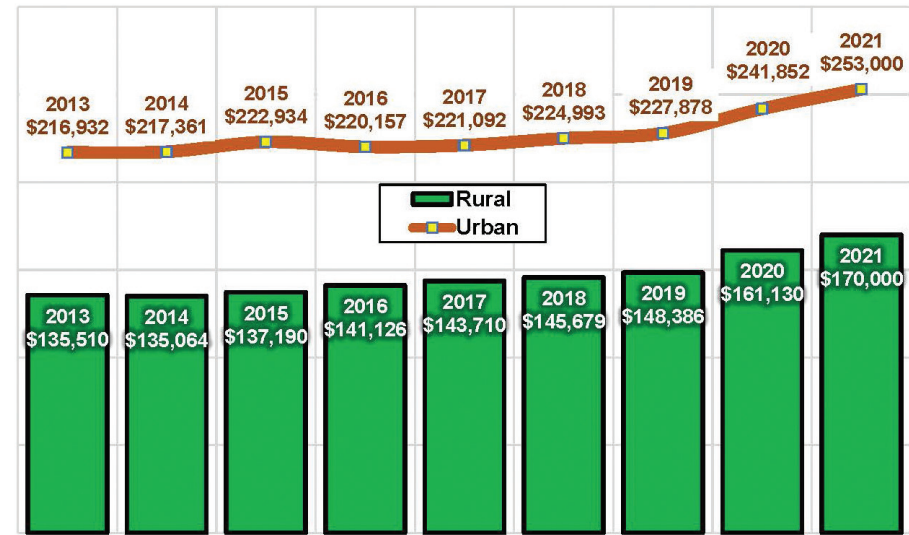
Housing Trends in Rural and Urban Pennsylvania



Number of Valid Residential Property Sales in Rural and Urban Pennsylvania, 2013 to 2021



Median Valid Residential Sales Prices in Rural and Urban Pennsylvania, 2013 to 2021



About the Snapshot

All data are from the Pennsylvania State Tax Equalization Board unless noted otherwise.

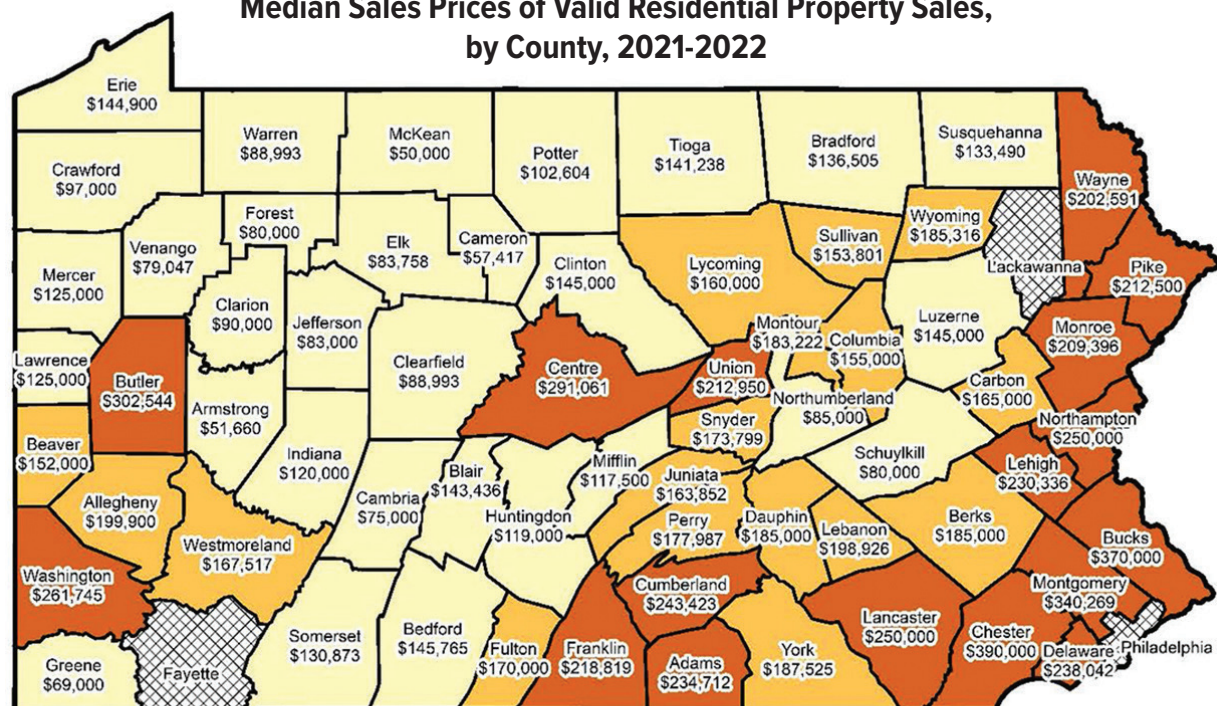
All financial data were adjusted for inflation using the CPI-U with 2021=100.

Data exclude Fayette, Lackawanna, and Philadelphia counties because of missing or incomplete data.

The Snapshot uses the Center's definition of rural and urban counties as follows: if a county's population density is less than the mean population density for the state, that county is considered rural. All other counties are urban. In Pennsylvania, the mean population density from the 2020 Census was 291 people per square mile.

For the fact sheet, *Rural Pennsylvania Housing Trends: An Update*, visit www.rural.pa.gov/publications/fact-sheets.

Median Sales Prices of Valid Residential Property Sales, by County, 2021-2022

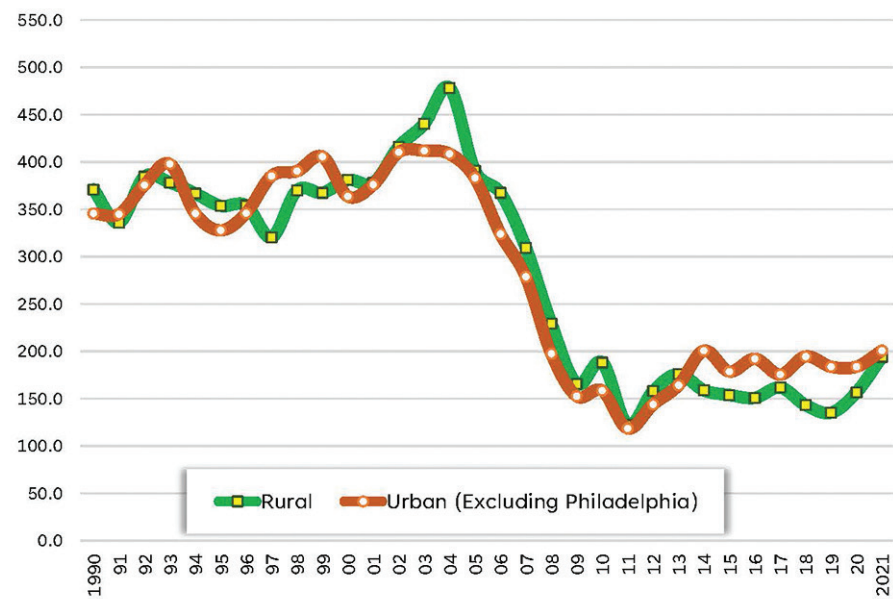


Statewide Median Sales Price = \$223,500



Number of Housing Permits Authorized in Rural and Urban Pennsylvania per 100,000 Residents, 1990 to 2021

(Philadelphia County was excluded because of a one-time regulatory change that caused the number of permits to exceed eight times their average annual count.)



Data source: U.S. Census Bureau.

Number of Mortgages and Amounts Borrowed in Rural and Urban Pennsylvania and Nationwide

	# Mortgages	
	Avg. # Home Mortgages, 2020-2021	% Change 2018-2019 to 2020-2021
Rural USA	571,573	34%
Rural Pennsylvania	17,688	37%
Urban USA	2,161,914	26%
Urban Pennsylvania	72,224	25%

	Amount Borrowed	
	Median Mortgage Amount, 2021	% Change 2020-2021*
Rural USA	\$235,600	14%
Rural Pennsylvania	\$183,200	17%
Urban USA	\$287,900	14%
Urban Pennsylvania	\$245,000	13%

Data source: Federal Housing Finance Agency.



Students, Professors Present Results of Student Micro Grant Projects

In 2022, the Center launched the Student Micro Grant Program to encourage graduate and undergraduate students at Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education universities, Penn State University, and the regional campuses of the University of Pittsburgh to pursue scholarly research projects that focus on rural Pennsylvania.

Grant awards of up to \$2,500 are available to students, who work under the direction of faculty, to conduct individual or classroom research.

In 2022, awards were approved for students and faculty from West Chester University of Pennsylvania and Indiana University of Pennsylvania. The students and faculty presented their projects to the Center's Board of Directors at its December 2022 meeting.

Student Micro Grant Projects

A Geospatial Analysis of Community Conditions and Hospital Access in Rural Pennsylvania

Dr. Jongwoong Kim, assistant professor in the Department of Geography & Planning and Center for GIS and Spatial Analysis at West Chester University of Pennsylvania, and student Quinten Harrison developed Geographic Information Systems (GIS) models to develop a better understanding of rural/urban healthcare access discrepancies in Pennsylvania. The team developed interactive web maps called, PA Community Conditions and Hospital Access, to identify hospital access, capacity, and community health-related conditions.

Harrison said that the student micro grant gave him the opportunity to conduct research on social disparities statewide, and to build his portfolio for other educational and career opportunities.

Natural Gas Leak Detection Using Cost-Effective Drone Sensor Technology

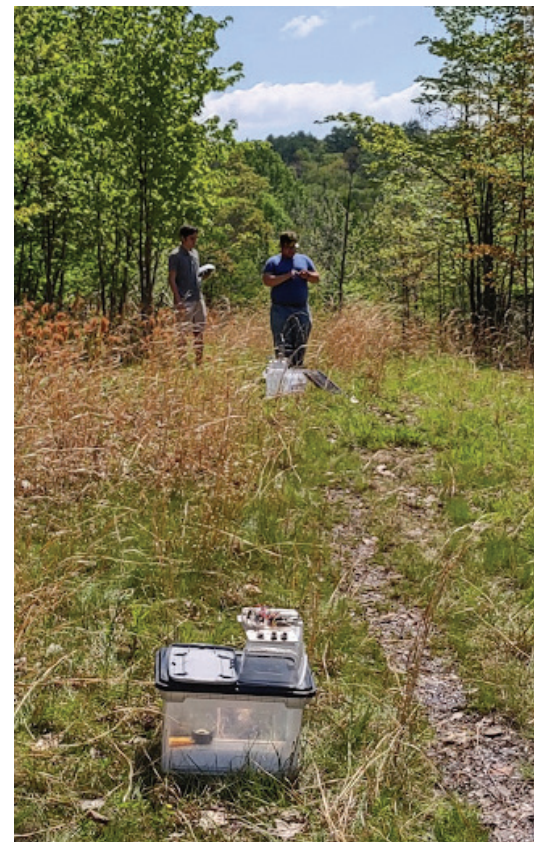
Isaac Dewar, former student in the Department of Chemistry, Biochemistry, Physics, and Engineering at Indiana University of Pennsylvania, presented his team's project, which tested the concept of using a drone-carried sensor to search for methane-leaking spots that could help identify the location of orphaned gas wells. The research was under the direction of Indiana University Professor Dr. Andrew Zhou, and included student Asher Skiles.

The research determined that inexpensive sensors used with the drone technology may provide a potential low-cost tool for finding orphan wells. Additionally, the



Quinten Harrison (left) and Dr. Jongwoong Kim of West Chester University of Pennsylvania.

versatile Arduino technology, which is an open-source electronics platform, provided a powerful way for analyzing, storing, and transporting data.



Indiana University of Pennsylvania students Issac Dewar (right) and Asher Skiles field testing the drone and Arduino technology.

JUST THE FACTS: PSSA SCORES STILL BELOW PRE-PANDEMIC LEVELS

Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA) test scores for elementary school students continue to lag behind pre-pandemic levels, according to data from the Pennsylvania Department of Education.

Pennsylvania Department of Education data from 2019 show that 64 percent of rural 3rd, 4th, and 5th graders scored advanced or proficient in English. In 2022, 56 percent of rural students scored advanced or proficient, a decrease of 9 percentage points. Among urban elementary students, 63 percent scored advanced or proficient in English in 2019. In 2022, 55 percent scored advanced or proficient, a decrease of 8 percentage points.

There was a similar pattern with math PSSA test results. In 2019, 51 percent of rural 3rd, 4th, and 5th graders scored advanced or proficient in English. In 2022, 45 percent of rural students scored advanced or proficient, a decrease of 6 percentage points. Among urban elementary school

students, 51 percent scored advanced or proficient in English in 2019. In 2022, 45 percent scored advanced or proficient, a decrease of 6 percentage points.

At the school district level, between 2019 and 2022, 221 school districts had a 10 percentage point or more decrease in students who scored advanced or proficient in English. Of these districts, 103 were rural and 118 were urban. For math, 172 districts had a 10 percentage point or more decrease in students who scored advanced or proficient from 2019 to 2022. Of these districts, 79 were rural and 93 were urban.

Despite the overall decrease, some districts had an increase or no change in PSSA English and math scores. Thirty districts (23 rural and seven urban) saw an increase in the percentage of students scoring advanced or proficient in English from 2019 to 2022. For math, 66 districts (41 rural and 25 urban) had an increase during this period.

How Municipalities Used Coronavirus State and Local Fiscal Recovery Funds

Pennsylvania municipalities received \$3.3 billion from the Coronavirus State and Local Fiscal Recovery Funds (SLFRF) program, which was part of the 2021 American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA). Rural Pennsylvania municipalities received a total of \$290.3 million, or \$100 per person, and urban municipalities received a total of \$3.02 billion, or \$299 per person, from SLFRF.

How are these funds being used? A Center analysis of U.S. Treasury data and the results of a February 2022 survey of municipal officials found that:

- SLFRF funds accounted for approximately 19 percent of total annual revenues for rural municipalities and 14 percent of total annual revenues for urban municipalities.
- As of April 2022, 38 percent of rural and 37 percent of urban municipalities had not identified a project on which to spend their first wave of SLFRF.
- Among municipalities that had identified projects, 92 percent of rural and 87 percent of urban municipalities spent their funds on revenue replacement and administration. Across the U.S., 72 percent of local governments spent their funds on revenue replacement and administration.

For the fact sheet, *Coronavirus State and Local Fiscal Recovery Funds in Rural and Urban Pennsylvania*, visit www.rural.pa.gov/publications/fact-sheets.

Center Welcomes New Assistant Director



In December, the Center welcomed new employee, Laura R. Dimino, Ph.D., as assistant director. Laura will oversee the Center's Research Grants Program and coordinate and develop external projects and Center initiatives.

Before joining the Center, Laura was the associate pro-

vost at Central Penn College, where she also served as director of Institutional Assessment and Accreditation. In addition, Laura previously served as a public affairs program analyst at the Pennsylvania Higher Education Assistance Agency, and as assistant director of academic programs at Temple University.

Laura holds a doctorate and master's degree in Political Science from the University of Rochester, and a bachelor's degree from Clark University.

Please join us in welcoming Laura to the Center.



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Resources

PA Preserves 13,069 Acres on 170 Farms in 2022

In December 2022, Pennsylvania protected 2,478 acres on 30 farms in 18 counties from future residential, or commercial development, investing more than \$8.9 million in state, county, local and nonprofit dollars in protecting prime farmland for the future. Pennsylvania ended 2022 with the protection of 170 farms and 13,069. The newly preserved farms were in Adams, Beaver, Berks, Blair, Bucks, Cambria, Chester, Cumberland, Lancaster, Lawrence, Lehigh, Montgomery, Northampton, Perry, Tioga, Union, Westmoreland, and York counties. By selling their land's development rights, landowners ensure that their farms will remain farms and never be sold to developers. Farm families often sell their land at below market value, donate additional land, or agree to conservation practices on their farms to leverage additional federal and state money to preserve more family farms. For more information on farmland preservation, visit the Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture's website at www.agriculture.pa.gov.

PA's Main Streets through the Pandemic

The Pennsylvania Downtown Center has released the report, *Pennsylvania's Main Streets through the Pandemic*, which looks at the impact of the PA Main Street Program on local economic resiliency during the pandemic. During the pandemic, Pennsylvania's Main Streets were an essential link between state decisionmakers and resources and the needs of downtown communities. The report indicates that Main Street programming proved to be a vital tool not just for economic recovery, but also to create the pre-conditions, such as diverse business mixes and customer bases, that bolster economic resiliency. The report also highlights the nuanced nature of local economies during a global health crisis. While there is no one-size-fits-all answer to supporting downtowns in Pennsylvania and beyond, distributing ongoing resources, funding, and program support is vital to the future economic resilience of businesses across the state. The report is available at www.padowntown.org.

Visit www.rural.pa.gov and scroll to the bottom of the page to subscribe to our online newsletter and rural updates.