



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

George Winner

Restore Voice of Rural New York

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One of the legislative assignments I most enjoyed during the course of 32 years of service in the State Legislature was my tenure as the head of a joint, bipartisan group known as the Legislative Commission on the Development of Rural Resources.

That took place from 2005 to 2009, when my chairmanship ended following the Democratic takeover over the Senate. Although I stayed on as a commission member for the past two years, it seemed to lose some of its stature and standing within the Legislature.

So it's a personal hope that one of the many changes that appear on tap for 2011 will be that the work of this worthwhile commission is reenergized. For at least a quarter of a century it served as a strong voice for rural New York within a Legislature dominated by downstate representatives.

The foundation and underlying purpose of the commission remains worthwhile, after all, so why not revitalize it?

For example, early during my chairmanship in 2006 we initiated a package of legislative proposals to address some of the key short- and long-term challenges facing rural communities in the region I represent, as well as rural areas across New York State. We called it the "Rural New York Agenda."

"We need to build a stronger commitment to a Rural New York Agenda within this Legislature," I said at the time, noting that only about 30 of the state's 212 state legislators represent what can largely be considered rural regions. I pledged to try to create a greater focus on rural New York among my legislative colleagues.

I'm still proud of the effort.

The "Rural New York Agenda" offered a series of proposals, many of which remain outstanding, focusing on a series of economic and cultural concerns that many rural communities statewide struggle to address, including the expansion of high-speed Internet; the recruitment and retention of volunteer fire fighters, emergency medical technicians (EMTs) and other emergency services personnel; high unemployment and limited economic opportunities; a lack of services for an ever-growing population of senior citizens; and planning and land use decisions which threaten some of the traditional foundations of rural New York's culture and economy, especially agriculture.

They were opening ideas and, for a time, they sparked a meaningful discussion on how New York government can best serve to improve the quality and strength of our rural communities.

During one part of this comprehensive effort the Rural Resources Commission joined with experts from Cornell University, a nationally recognized leader on rural affairs, to advance what was known as the "Rural Visioning Project." We conducted a series of Rural Listening Sessions in rural communities statewide to give local leaders, farmers, advocates, concerned citizens and others an opportunity to share their ideas and suggestions for public policies to address the needs of rural regions. From these listening sessions and a subsequent State of Rural New York Conference, we began to cement a more concrete working agenda for federal, state and local policymakers.

It was good, solid, meaningful work, and it still can serve a valuable, productive purpose.