11th Annual Arizona Rural Policy Forum Final Report

It is our pleasure to report the final outcomes of the Arizona Rural Policy Forum, an initiative of the Local First Arizona Foundation and the Arizona Rural Development Council, which was August 9th – 11th, 2017, in Safford/Thatcher, Arizona. Your support was invaluable and we want you to know that the successes of the event will reverberate throughout the state during the year. We are working on several next steps to build on the synergies that were initiated at the forum.

Attendee Survey Results

We are pleased with the strong positive feedback we received from this year’s Rural Policy Forum attendees. Here is a summary of their feedback:

100% of survey respondents said that the content of the Rural Policy Forum sessions provided ideas that they can take back to their community to share or implement.

98% of survey respondents said that they learned new information that will help them and their organization in the near future.

99% of survey respondents said that networking at the Rural Policy Forum was helpful and that they met individuals that will be valuable to them in the future.

97% of survey respondents felt the event was well organized.

On a scale of 1 to 5 with 1 being poor and 5 being utterly fantastic:

• Average overall conference experience rated 4.5.
• Experience in Safford/Thatcher, Arizona, rated 4.4.
• Rural Policy Forum relevancy to professional needs rated 4.3.
• Rural Policy Forum speakers rated 4.5.

Forum Impacts

Local First Arizona Foundation expects to see the following impacts in rural communities based on outcomes from the conference:

1. Improved strategy and plan development. Understanding the key role strategy and plan development play in any economic development goal was a major overarching topic among the Rural Policy Forum this year. This point of focus came from industry professionals working on business attraction and retention, agriculture, waste management, and tourism planning, as well as capacity building and personal time management. Understanding the importance of creating a plan and knowing how to follow through to a goal and beyond is essential in the development process. Additionally, partnerships are critical for success in rural areas. Having clearly defined roles is necessary to keep partnerships productive while advancing toward shared goals. We plan to continue to foster these skills with rural stakeholders over time through our monthly seminar series.
2. **Collaborative tourism development.** Many sessions focused on utilizing historic and natural resources as strategies for tourism development and increased economic opportunity. The events roundtable session provided constructive critique and fresh ideas to various rural events that attract people from around the state. With collaborative resource sharing, networking, and support we foresee continued growth in this industry sector for rural communities statewide. Arizonans spend $6.5B vacationing in California each year. Working with rural leaders, the Rural Development Council hopes to redirect 10% of this total spending toward small towns over the next 2-3 years.

3. **Creative placemaking.** Fostering community identity and telling a better story about rural Arizona were major points of focus in several sessions. Friday's keynote speaker, who was highly regarded by attendees, spoke about the importance of creating a sense of place and featured outstanding examples of communities that have created a tangible experience to share their sense of place. Many attendees commented on how inspired they were to focus on more creative and fun placemaking initiatives when they returned home. We expect to see innovative projects from around the state to help express and further create community identity and sense of place. In fact, Clarkdale sent a photo in already of a wonderful ‘human sign’ they made, spelling out Clarkdale with a kayak in front of city hall. The image went viral on Facebook and garnered many positive comments.

4. **Business preparedness.** Several sessions pertained to accessing capital, procurement strategies, understanding infrastructure and community capacity, and attraction and retention strategies for rural businesses. Economic development will always be a point of focus at the Rural Policy Forum, and it’s is our hope that having business and economic development leaders from various communities share their knowledge and success strategies will further promote regional collaboration and economic success. Local First will also continue throughout the year with new technology training courses for entrepreneurs and small business owners.

5. **Connectivity.** LAF believes that having a statewide presence will enable us to be more of a trusted insider, rather than a disconnected urban outsider. We believe our relationships with rural leaders and stakeholders have improved drastically and we therefore know we can help streamline processes that allow for more rural support across sectors. This year we introduced our newest team members, brought on to further work in rural areas around the state, to showcase to attendees that rural support is stronger than ever from LAF. We plan to further continue this growth and support and have placed two additional AmeriCorps Vistas in Gila and Cochise counties to build economic resilience in those areas.

**Next Steps**

1. We partnered with Ignite Marketing of Kingman, to complete the final phases of our Rural Community Profiles project. We will fully launch this resource in the coming months on the Arizona Rural Development Council website. The goal of the profiles will be twofold: to increase in-state tourism and to support rural business attraction.

2. Next year we will plan to focus further session content on policies that impact rural areas. This came back as a high request from attendees this year.

3. The Local First Arizona Foundation and the Arizona Rural Development Council will continue to build a strong rural Arizona communications network, through a monthly webinar series developed after last years Rural Policy Forum. This series will dive more in depth to some of the topics discussed at this year’s event.

4. Next year at the forum we would like to bring back the nonprofit funders roundtable, which directly connects non-profits with those institutions that fund rural organizations and programs.

5. Based on feedback, education and health care will have more of a focus next year.

6. The 2018 Rural Policy Forum will be held in Wickenburg, Arizona. Details will be announced soon!

Thank you sincerely for your time, your financial support, and your expertise. This forum has demonstrated a real need in rural towns, and if we listen earnestly, we will find inroads into supporting these communities to work together to solve many of their current challenges.
On behalf of the entire board of Directors for Local First Arizona and Local First Arizona Foundation, I thank you for your support. We could not do this work without you!

Sincerely,
Kimber Lanning
Director, Local First Arizona Foundation