

## **Lt. Governor Gregg Empowers Rural Iowa Communities**

*By Lt. Governor Adam Gregg, Iowa  
September 21, 2020*

### **Best practices to highlight:**

- Rural set-asides in tax credit and grant programs, ensuring rural communities get support
- Eased regulations and qualifications for rural projects, making programs more usable and accessible for rural communities
- Target broadband incentives for higher speeds and underserved areas, and reward partnerships with private partners and local governments
- Invest in rural leadership development

Iowa is essentially rural in character. Simply put, Iowa wouldn't be Iowa without our rolling fields of corn and soybeans, dotted with vibrant rural communities. As natives of small rural towns ourselves, Governor Kim Reynolds and I are very passionate about ensuring that there continues to be opportunity and prosperity in every corner of our state.

In my role as lieutenant governor, I lead the Governor's Empower Rural Iowa Initiative, which is a public-private partnership focused on connecting, growing, and investing in our rural areas. In just over two years in existence, we've scored a number of meaningful policy victories which can serve as examples of best practices in rural economic development

One of the major challenges impeding growth in rural Iowa is a shortage of quality housing stock. Some entire counties haven't seen new housing starts in decades. It makes it hard to recruit workers and young families if nice modern housing isn't an option. However, from the homebuilders' perspective, it is difficult to achieve an adequate return on investment in the rural marketplace.

In Iowa, we developed a workforce housing tax credit program, and targeted it to our rural communities. From the beginning, a portion of the credits were set aside for use in the least-populous 88 counties in Iowa, and some of the regulations were eased for rural projects. However, the program became so effective and popular that there was a five-year waiting list for credits. Working with the legislature, we dedicated additional funds to clear the backlog last fiscal year, and going forward we doubled the annual rural set-aside in this program.

This program has encouraged all types of housing investment right where it is needed most, bringing single family homes, duplexes, and apartment complexes to our rural communities. For example, the most recent round of funding provided support for over 500 housing units, many of them in some of our smallest counties.

Improving broadband access has also been a priority, as connectivity is so important for business, agriculture, and education. The global pandemic has only brought the need for connectivity into even sharper relief as nearly our entire lives moved online.

While 2020 has brought significant challenges, it's been a good year for broadband policy in Iowa. We further refined and improved the Empower Rural Iowa broadband grant program, continuing steady funding and increasing the state match, while prioritizing higher speeds and underserved areas. Perhaps most significantly, Gov. Reynolds chose to allocate \$50 million in CARES Act funds to an accelerated broadband grant program, and another \$26 million in Governor's Emergency Education Relief (GEER) funds focused on supporting education-related connectivity for students. This massive infusion of federal funds directed by Governor Reynolds will undoubtedly improve rural connectivity, now and in years to come.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, we have focused on developing leaders in our rural communities. Ultimately, the survival of our small towns won't be because of government programs. Instead, rural communities will survive and thrive because of the strong local leaders who set a vision for what their community should be, and work with one another to execute on that vision. We have sought to empower local leaders with proven strategies for improving their towns. In doing so, we're working to grow the next generation of leaders for our state.

Iowa's rural communities are the backbone of not only our state, but our nation as a whole. Whether it be housing or connectivity, our administration is focused on addressing their needs in smart and proven ways. By leveraging private and public partnerships, I believe we have found creative solutions to the complex problems these Iowans face.