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OFFICE OF THE GOVERNOR

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The following is a column by Governor Kathleen Sebelius:

New approach needed in rural America

Rural communities in Kansas, like others around the country, face a number of challenges that threaten their long-term prosperity, and in some instances their very survival.

To meet these challenges, we need to step back and set a new direction for rural development – one that starts by helping rural communities come together to create a shared vision for the future.

That's taking place in Greensburg and in several other communities around Kansas where the "Public Square Process" is being used to help residents develop a long-term vision for their community. Through a community dialogue, plans are created that can then be used to guide the community's development.

That's different than the current approach which often relies on a hodgepodge of grant programs from the state and federal governments, and which doesn't always deliver the desired results.

Once a vision for the future is developed within a community, we must make sure it has the tools and leadership needed to take advantage of the initiatives that are in place. We also need to loosen the restrictions on many of the programs run by the federal government, because those restrictions currently leave too many rural communities behind.

But beyond that, we need to provide incentives for entrepreneurs to create jobs in rural areas. We've seen the success of micro-loans overseas – it is time to bring that success home so we can help create off-farm jobs and allow people to supplement their incomes through small, family-run businesses.

It's also time for the Legislature to create Rural Opportunity Zones that give tax incentives to businesses that create jobs in rural communities. I proposed these zones last session, yet the Legislature failed to step up and provide this incentive to rural businesses.

The challenges faced by rural Kansas are different than those previously faced. Yet just as happened in the past, I'm confident we can again come together to ensure a brighter future for residents throughout our state and to ensure we move forward as one Kansas.

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