

Redefining Rural Economic Development

By Carolyn Shafer

On August 7 and 8, I attended the Eighth Annual Rural Policy Forum in Globe to learn more about the experiences of other Arizona rural communities. The sold-out conference was presented by the Arizona Rural Development Council and Local First Arizona. Attendance was evenly divided among government representatives, businesses, and nonprofit organizations.

There were 22 presentations about local economic development through the lens of education, housing, infrastructure, research, grants, workforce development, branding, and several other topics. All the critical components of creating a thriving community were covered. And there was lots of

valuable networking—which is the best reason for attending conferences.

One important “take away” from the conference is the evolving definition of community economic development. The concept of economic development is transforming to include recognition that a community’s economic health is also about stewardship, a sense of place, and quality of life.

Economic health is not measured only by jobs and dollars. It is also defined by a resilient community with increased interdependency within and reduced dependency on outside sources and/or events. Identifying and fostering a community’s revenue

base is as important as assisting community members and entities in reducing their expenses (through locally grown foods, education to reduce utility costs, and other such practices).

During one session, there was a discussion about recruiting committed and involved citizens. From the back of the room, I shared that in my community probably 15 percent of the population is involved in approximately 41 community organizations. Just about everyone in the room turned around and wanted to know what community I represented. On the basis of their reaction, I’d say we are definitely on the right track, fellow community

members.

So what next? In a May 2014 PRT article, “Coming Together as a Community Through Discussion,” I offered to speak with local business owners and community organizations to establish a plan that truly perpetuates a strong and sustainable economy. Over the summer, I talked with and received preliminary feedback from a number of individuals and organizations. With that feedback and with the information gained from this conference, I will continue the outreach with the intention of creating a collaborative, long-term vision for a thriving and resilient community.