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GOVERNOR

STATE OF MICHIGAN  
DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE  
AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

GARY MCDOWELL  
DIRECTOR

**To:** Gary McDowell, MDARD Director  
Rural Development Fund Board members

**From:** Heather Throne, MDARD Grants and Commodity Program Manager

**Date:** July 30, 2020

**Re:** Rural Development Fund Grants Public Comment Memo

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The Michigan Department of Agriculture and Rural Development issued a press release on June 3, 2020, requesting public comment regarding Rural Development Fund Program priorities. Public comment was to be submitted to the department by July 2, 2020. In addition to the press release, the department posted on their social media channels, Facebook and Twitter, encouraging followers to submit public comment as well.

In all, we received three comments. They are noted below:

1. 6/3/2020 via [audreywilliams1013@gmail.com](mailto:audreywilliams1013@gmail.com)>

Infrastructure such as a reliable cell phone signal which means more than 1 - 2 bars, internet service that supports true connectivity for business and remote work/schooling and better rural road maintenance, including ditches, grading and brining dirt roads.

2. 7/1/2020 via [aldent@rightplace.org](mailto:aldent@rightplace.org)

**2020 Michigan Department of Agriculture & Rural Development Public Comment  
Submitted by The Right Place, Inc. - Rural Development Team**

As local Economic Development Professionals in rural West Michigan communities, we appreciate this opportunity to provide public comment. Please consider the following as you establish 2021 program priorities:

- **COVID-19 Response** – The feedback we have received from rural employers, especially small businesses, is that the cost of PPE and the numerous modifications required to provide a safe environment to employees is very burdensome and threatening to sustainability and growth. Funding needs to be readily available to help businesses meet these new, previously unbudgeted, costs.
- **Broadband Expansion** – The current pandemic has highlighted the extreme disadvantage that rural businesses, employees, and students experience due to the lack of quality, affordable internet access. In order to build the capacity of rural communities, significant

investment in broadband expansion must take place sooner rather than later to ensure equal education, employment and business opportunities are available to all.

- **Private Utilities** - Rural business attraction, retention, and expansion continue to be stifled by lack of infrastructure. While ongoing improvement of municipal infrastructure is obviously important, the need for expanded private utilities such as broadband, increased electrical capacity and natural gas is often found to be more lacking in rural areas, with little or no funding sources available to address it.
- **Workforce Development** - Rural employers continue to struggle to find and keep the talent necessary to grow, even during the current pandemic. In order to address this shortage, creative talent attraction, retention and worker share programs must be developed and valued as much as specific employee training opportunities.
- **Housing** - Michigan's housing crisis is especially apparent in rural communities and yet current state housing program funding scoring does not lend itself to successful rural applications. As a key factor in attracting and retaining rural workforce, investment in development of quality affordable workforce housing must increase substantially through MDARD and other programs.
- **Tourism** – The value of our state's incredible recreational assets such as parks and trails is immense. However, it is our belief that tourism-related applications that would allow for investment in farms and small businesses that provide agritourism opportunities and/or serve as destination food and craft beverage producers should score higher as economic development projects.
- **Capacity-Building** – Often times the few resources available/applicable to rural projects & communities require a degree of expertise and capacity that is just not present in these situations. As an example, a very small village – often times the kind of community that would stand to benefit the most from a program such as MEDC's Redevelopment-Ready Communities – simply does not have the 'horsepower' to complete the various aspects of the process in order to become certified. Consideration of this critical limiting factor in our very rural areas is important, and opportunities to enhance & increase this capacity could be explored. This will help our rural communities from falling further behind.

Your consideration of this input is greatly appreciated as you develop 2021 Rural Development grant funding opportunities. Please feel free to reach out to any of us for further discussion or clarification. Thank you for your continued generous support of rural development in our counties and throughout our great state.

Respectfully,

The Right Place Rural Development Team

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3. 7/2/2020 via [kelly@mipotato.com](mailto:kelly@mipotato.com)

For the purposes of the Rural Development Grants, it is essential to the potato industry that Montcalm County be eligible. We recognize that the county reaches the current population base exceed the grant level, however, the county has significant areas of agriculture – in particular potatoes – and many areas outside of the population areas that could benefit from eligibility.

*Kelly Turner, Ed.D., CAE*

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