Reenvisioning Rural America: Supporting Asset-Based Rural Investment and Capacity Building

Speaker Biographies

Andrew Dumont is a community development analyst at the Federal Reserve Board where he leads the Board’s work on rural development, affordable housing, and other place-conscious community and economic development policy areas. Prior to joining the Board, Andrew worked at Pathway Lending, a community development financial institution serving Tennessee and Alabama, where he worked as a program specialist structuring and underwriting small business loans to further the organization’s economic development priorities. Andrew has a Master’s Degree in Public Policy from The George Washington University, a Bachelor’s Degree from the State University of New York at Buffalo, and is a Certified Public Accountant.

Heidi Khokhar is the Executive Director of Rural Development Initiative. Her RDI journey began in 1998 when she helped assist on several community strategic plans and discovered her passion for helping rural communities thrive. Over the years, she has worked directly in over 50 communities in the Pacific Northwest and with a vast network of rural leaders through RDI’s Ford Institute Leadership Program. She helped to design, deliver, and author the leadership program and, for seven years, managed the expansion of the Community Ambassador Team – an army of highly engaged volunteer leaders. As Executive Director, she is committed to RDI’s vision of vibrant, diverse rural communities as a result of skilled, inclusive local leadership and robust community-led efforts. Heidi is a graduate of the University of Oregon and Southern Oregon University.

Joy Morten-Thomas is the Assistant Administrator for Community Development and Outreach at Fort Valley State University College of Agriculture, Family Sciences and Technology. In this role, she focuses on providing technical assistance to rural communities located within Cooperative Extension’s service delivery area to develop strategies to improve their ability to compete effectively in a global society. She has a proven track record of working directly with local governments and non-profit organizations specifically assisting in linking them to financial and non-financial resources available to aid them in implementing their county-based planning and development goals. Joy has a Master’s degree in Business Administration from the University of Phoenix and a Bachelor’s degree from Wesleyan College.

Corianne Payton Scally is a principal research associate in the Metropolitan Housing and Communities Policy Center at the Urban Institute, where she explores the design, implementation, and outcomes of affordable housing and community development policy and programs for vulnerable populations across rural and urban areas. Her research on rural communities ranges from measuring assets and capacity to guiding investments in equitable solutions that boost services and infrastructure, and improve health and economic mobility. To explore these issues, Scally leads mixed-method research projects, directing extensive primary data collection via site visits, interviews, focus groups, and surveys, and analysis of administrative data to evaluate program processes and outcomes. Scally is a former associate professor in urban planning and former affordable housing developer. From 2015 to 2016, she led data and research initiatives at the US Department of Agriculture’s Rural Housing Service for the Urban Institute. She received her PhD in urban planning and policy development from Rutgers University.
**Xochitl Torres Small** is the Under Secretary for Rural Development. Before coming to Rural Development, Xochitl was a United States Representative for the fifth largest district in the country. In the midst of the COVID-19 crisis, Xochitl kept a rural hospital from closing its doors, improved constituent access to healthcare over the phone, and helped secure tens of millions of dollars for broadband in New Mexico through USDA’s ReConnect Program. Prior to the coronavirus pandemic, Xochitl raised the alarm on broadband disparities, serving on Majority Whip James Clyburn’s Rural Broadband Taskforce and as an original cosponsor of the Accessible, Affordable Internet for All Act. As a member of the House Agriculture Committee, Xochitl helped champion the needs of dairy farmers and sponsored legislation to help local producers and rural communities invest in infrastructure to navigate new markets. Xochitl forged additional bipartisan solutions on the House Armed Services Committee and as chairwoman of the Oversight, Management, and Accountability subcommittee of the House Homeland Security Committee. Xochitl was the first woman and first person of color to represent New Mexico’s second congressional district. The granddaughter of farmworkers, Xochitl Torres Small grew up in the borderlands of New Mexico. She came home from college to work as a field organizer, working in colonias in southern New Mexico. She continued serving rural New Mexico as a field representative for Senator Tom Udall, where she collaborated with local grassroots leaders, business owners, elected officials, and regional and state economic development officials to help communities rebound from the Great Recession. Inspired by Senator Udall’s work on water in the West, Torres Small studied water law and worked closely with rural water utilities. After law school, she returned home to clerk for United States District Court Judge Robert C. Brack. Throughout her career, Xochitl has employed her experience working in vulnerable, rural communities to achieve lasting investments that combat persistent poverty. Xochitl has a law degree from the University of New Mexico School of Law, an undergraduate degree from Georgetown University’s School of Foreign Service, and an international baccalaureate from Waterford Kamhlaba United World College of Southern Africa. She’s happily married to her husband, New Mexico State Representative Nathan Small.

**Janet Topolsky** is the Executive Director of the Aspen Institute Community Strategies Group. For nearly four decades, Janet has helped community leaders, organizations and policymakers across the country find, create and spread development strategies that work. At CSG since 1993, Topolsky has specialized in peer-learning design and facilitation, family asset building, “doing economic development differently,” connecting low-wealth rural and urban places and populations to regional economic development and better livelihoods, and community development philanthropy – building the capacity of place-rooted foundations to improve local economies. Before Aspen, Janet worked as a development policy analyst; as communications director for Prosperity Now (then called the Corporation for Enterprise Development) and editor of its Entrepreneurial Economy Review; as special assistant to the director of the Michigan Department of Commerce; and as a youth organizer and policy advocate. A native of Detroit, Michigan, Janet has been to every state in the union – at least once. She is a graduate of James Madison College at Michigan State University and holds a Master of Public Policy from the Gerald R. Ford School of Public Policy at the University of Michigan.