

Our Wisconsin Revolution: Lawmakers respond to rural bleeding with cosmetics

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With Wisconsin losing more than two family farms a day, state lawmakers convened in a special session are considering largely symbolic measures that fail to address the driving forces behind the farm crisis and responding to hemorrhaging rural communities by offering to hand out what amounts to cosmetics gift sets.

“The agenda the governor put forward for the special session was puny. The agenda legislative leaders are now settling on is puny. The ideas are all well and good. But they don’t get anywhere close to the root of what’s gone haywire in the farm economy and what’s killing rural communities,” said Our Wisconsin Revolution executive director Mike McCabe, who got his start in life milking cows and working the land with his family, first in Rock County and later in Clark County.

“Family farmers are being driven out of business by get-big-or-get-out policies fueling massive-scale industrialization of agriculture. Why not an immediate moratorium on new factory feedlots? Why not put Wisconsin on record in favor of a new national supply management system allowing family farmers to keep their heads above water? Why not use the state budget surplus to bring high-speed Internet to the many places that currently can’t get it? Why not think as big as the farm crisis itself?” McCabe said.

He added that most rural residents do not farm but rather live and work in small towns. The legislature’s special session should address the health of the rural communities that farmers are a part of and depend on.

Our Wisconsin Revolution put forward eight ways to stabilize the farm economy,

strengthen rural communities, and make the state a leader nationally in promoting countermeasures to rural decline:

- **A moratorium on new Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations (CAFOs)**, the gigantic agricultural factories that are putting family farms out of business, and **stricter oversight of manure disposal** preventing CAFOs from contaminating drinking water in rural communities and shifting the cost of pollution control and abatement to the public.
- **Parity pricing and supply management** to assure farmers of a living wage for their labor, keep farms profitable and allow smaller-scale, family-run farms to compete with corporate agricultural factories. Parity pricing was a staple of U.S. agricultural policy dating back to the 1930s until it was jettisoned in the 1970s and 1980s. Family farmers have been pushed to the brink by close to 50 years of policies incentivizing industrialized agriculture, encouraging overproduction and destabilizing commodity prices. And they've been dealt an additional lethal blow by disastrous federal trade policies that have triggered retaliatory tariffs on U.S. farm products.
- **Universal high-speed Internet and cell phone service.** Meaningfully addressing the rural-urban divide requires dealing with the digital divide. According to the Federal Communications Commission, more than a quarter of people living in rural areas lack access to even minimum speed broadband, compared to less than 2% without it in urban areas. Rural electrification in the 1930s and 1940s brought electrical power to even the most remote rural areas of the country and revolutionized the rural economy and rural life. A comparable effort is needed to bring the 21st Century equivalent of electricity—high-speed Internet and mobile voice—to every small town and farm. It's not possible to fully participate in the 21st Century economy or modern society without these tools. Dead zones so commonly found in rural areas contribute significantly to rising economic and social inequality. Reliable Internet and cell phone signals are basic necessities in this day and age and way too many people can't get them.
- **No more rural school closings.** Schools are the heart of a rural community. Cut out the heart and the community dies. A moratorium on local school closings needs to be established and enforced. Rural school rescue aid should be made part of the school financing system.
- **Keep the local post offices open.** Post offices are invaluable community

assets, particularly in rural areas where the digital divide looms large. Post office closings in small towns increase rural isolation and economic disparities. Vibrant rural communities depend on the U.S. Postal Service remaining true to its statutory [mission of binding the nation together](#) and its universal service obligation guaranteeing service to every American residence and business at a standard affordable price, with no area of the country discriminated against, no matter how costly or difficult to reach.

- **Establish new satellite college campuses in rural areas.** No new university campuses have been established in Wisconsin since 1968. Since 1994, eight new prisons have been built and a ninth built by a private company was purchased by the state on speculation. Two new youth prisons are on the way. Siting small satellite campuses in underserved rural areas not only would be a boon to local economies and expand access to higher education to rural populations, it also would make good on the Wisconsin Idea that the boundaries of the university system should be the boundaries of the state. Telling people living in remote parts of the state to avail themselves of online courses or distance learning is insensitive bordering on cruel considering the lack of access to reliable high-speed Internet in rural areas.
- **Make it possible to maintain decent roads.** Bad roads and a good economy are incompatible. State transportation policy has for years favored new construction and highway expansion—especially in urban and suburban areas—over basic upkeep to the point where some small towns and rural areas have been left with no choice but to tear up paved roads and go back to gravel because they can't afford to keep filling their potholes. Putting a stop to this trend can be done by reorienting transportation spending to prioritize maintenance of existing roads.
- **Restore local democracy and home rule.** Well over 100 state laws have been made in Wisconsin since 2011 taking away decision-making authority from local communities. State preemption laws limit or prohibit local decisions on everything from school budgets and shoreline development to building codes and property inspections. Elected representatives chosen by the people in local communities have had their hands tied with respect to the bidding process for local road projects, siting of animal feedlots and approval of mining projects or the construction of oil and gas pipelines. Communities are not allowed to set their own workplace standards for wages, benefits and working conditions and cannot have a minimum wage higher than the state's. They can't establish their own sick leave policies. They can't join with other communities to set up regional transit

authorities. Communities should be given way more latitude to decide what's best for them.

“Family farmers are in crisis. Small towns are struggling and slowly dying. A way of life is threatened with extinction. This touches all of us, no matter where you live,” McCabe said. “One of the most powerful forces splitting America—the rural-urban divide—needs to be tackled and there is no better place to get serious about the effort than the state known as America’s Dairyland.”

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