

Reflections on UIMF’s Panel Discussion on Sustainable Development in Rural Utah



On April 19, 2019, the Utah International Mountain Forum (UIMF), a coalition of student clubs at Utah Valley University (UVU), held a panel discussion titled “Sustainable Development in Rural Utah,” which featured Ms. Geri Gamber, Executive Director of the Southeastern Utah Association of Local Governments/Southeastern Utah Economic Development District (SEUALG/SUEDD); The Honorable Mrs. Christine Watkins, Utah Representative of District 69; Ms. Nicholina Womack, CEO of FutureINDesign; Mr. Tony Martines, Carbon County Commissioner; and The Honorable Michael Kourianos, Mayor of Price. Lacey Meyer, UIMF Vice President, organized and hosted the event, along with Joel Frost, UVU Foreign Affairs Club President.

The purpose of the panel discussion was to “educate students in urban Utah about the complexities and importance of rural Utah’s economy, growth, and sustainability.” After opening remarks by Samuel Elzinga, UIMF President, Ms. Gambler spoke on the link between economic development and overcoming poverty in rural Utah. Ms. Gambler stated that rural Utah is growing much slower than urban Utah and that it experiences high rates of poverty, describing San Juan County’s 28.4% poverty rate as the worst. Ms. Gambler also described factors that result in higher poverty rates such as outmigration, chronic underinvestment, and a lack of resources to participate in society, isolation, and ineffective local governments. Ms. Gambler then described how SEUALG/SUEDD

addresses these concerns through various programs, such as “Circles,” which helps build meaningful relationships to help individuals, especially youth, develop programs and meet goals to overcome poverty.

Next, Representative Watkins spoke on how legislation can support rural Utah. Representative Watkins described how she advocates for issues that face rural Utah, especially related to agriculture and mining. She described the lack of rural representation in the state government, stating that she is the only rural woman in the Utah House. Representative Watkins also described how she participates in weekly caucuses with other rural representatives and various rural Utah stakeholders, for the purpose of addressing rural concerns. She stated her goal to provide an important and oft-neglected voice for rural people, as many rural Utahns push back against urban leaders who, without living in and experiencing the challenges faced by rural Utahns, believe they have the solutions for them. Representative Watkins then described a number of bills that she has sponsored or co-sponsored related to rural issues of economic development.

Mayor Kourianos then spoke on how the city of Price is working to become more economically sustainable. Mayor Kourianos described his goal as mayor to “sell” Price to businesses, organizations, and individuals who can bring growth to his city. He described how in Price, the future of coal, which is a main economic driver in Price, is rapidly ending, and how he and others are trying to prepare Price for a diversified economic future. Mayor Kourianos then described his membership on the Coal Country Strike Team, which is a partnership between researchers, local leaders and experts, and others to develop a plan for Emery and Carbon Counties to address economic development, infrastructure development, and health issues. The team is participating in the Alliance for the American Dream competition with the hopes of winning \$1 million in funding for their proposals. Mayor Kourianos then described his vision for Price as a university town, a hub for the tech sector, and Emery and Carbon Counties as the fastest growing counties in Utah.

Next, Ms. Womack spoke about FutureINDesign and the role of bringing businesses to rural Utah communities for economic development. Ms. Womack described the mission of FutureINDesign, which is to narrow the digital literacy gap among rural youth and adult learners to provide a pipeline of diverse talent related to STEAM industries (science, technology, engineering, arts, mathematics). Ms. Womack also described how FutureINDesign helps people build soft skills like effective communications and to prepare its learners professionally through workforce readiness, work simulations, and internships/apprenticeships that help rural people be prepared to address their communities’ issues. Ms. Womack also spoke on FutureINDesign’s partnership with Blacksmith International, a supply chain outsourcer, on preparing learners for jobs in that and other fields.

Mr. Martines then spoke on how economic development can be further advanced in Carbon County. Mr. Martines described the strengths of the area, such as its ethnic diversity and cooperation between local government, organizations, and people, to counter the problems faced in the county, such as mines/plants closing and businesses leaving the area. Mr. Martines also

spoke on the need for rural Utah to be better represented in state government, especially by the governor, and how he and others in Carbon County are currently focusing on how to improve wages, job access, and local education funding.

Joel Frost then moderated a question and answer period and the speakers addressed topics such as the economic and political urban/rural divide, issue-specific measures as a solution to overcoming poverty, and the role of education in rural development. Afterwards, I had the privilege of speaking with Representative Watkins and Mayor Kourianos on agricultural sustainability and how to support youth who want to continue working as farmers and ranchers. Both shared with me the complexities surrounding my questions, noting that no easy or clear answer exists, but that through youth engagement with each other, local government, and elsewhere, issues facing agricultural sustainability can be effectively addresses. Mayor Kourianos also spoke with me about modernizing and diversifying agricultural practices.

Overall, I was very impressed with and learned a lot about the issues facing Utah rural development, as well as the many ways in which civil society and government are trying to address issues such as poverty. Being from a rural community myself, I was grateful to be given many ideas on how to work towards issues that my own community faces, such as outmigration, poverty, and businesses moving out of town. I am grateful to Lacey Meyer and UIMF for making this event possible.

Michael Hinatsu, UIMF Vice President