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Strengthening Ohio's Rural Communities

Half of Ohio is farmland, where our farmers not only provide feed for farms, but also put food on tables and fill the tanks of cars and trucks around the world. A quarter of Ohioans live in rural areas, where raw materials are harvested to make everything from air craft engines to clay pots and pans. Throughout our history, small towns like Portsmouth, my hometown of Mansfield, and rural communities like Athens and New Philadelphia have been keys to our state's economic prosperity.

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Yet for far too long, Ohio's small towns and rural communities have been overlooked. Along the highways and back roads where trucks transport our goods and products, millions of Ohioans live miles away from workplaces, schools, and hospitals. We cannot strengthen Ohio's economy without strengthening our rural communities and small towns.



This month, I've been traveling across our state on a "Made in Ohio Tour," meeting with Ohioans who are rebuilding our hometowns, small businesses, and family farms to become, once again, the engine of our national economic success. Last week, I was at Hocking College Energy Institute meeting with students who are taking courses in advanced hybrid energy technology. They're preparing for the jobs that will drive the 21st century economy. In that roundtable, local college professors, students, and community leaders told me about the work they're doing to position Ohio as a national hub for clean energy manufacturing.

In Athens, I was honored to meet a 24-year-old volunteer fire-fighter named Eric from Meigs County who enrolled in Hocking College's Energy Institute because he felt a clean energy job would be the best bet for a job in the future. He also wanted to stay in his small hometown and make a living through a homegrown job.

William, a paper mill worker from Logan County, was recently laid off because unfair trade practices closed the doors of the mill. He received trade adjustment assistance, which is provided to workers who lose their jobs because of unfair trade, to go back to school. He's training for clean energy jobs because he wants a job that will not be shipped overseas and where he can make a difference – for his small town community and for our nation.

At roundtable discussions in places like Logan, and at Barium & Chemicals in Steubenville and at the Corporation for Ohio Appalachian Development Annual Convention in Marietta, mayors, city planners,

and representatives from Appalachian development agencies discussed how to connect their small towns and rural communities with critical public and private economic development resources.

Here's what I've heard during the tour: one way Ohioans are hard at work increasing rural economic competitiveness and our public health programs is by investing in rural broadband. Access to broadband will modernize the way small communities work, promoting job creation, expanding markets, and stimulating the economy in rural Ohio.



Broadband bridges the digital gap that too often disadvantages rural Ohio – undermining business development and compromising timely access to basic public services like fire, police, and health care. Just this month, the U.S. Departments of Agriculture and Commerce announced that Ohio's Middle Mile Consortium (OMMC), a public-private state-wide partnership, will receive more than \$141 million in funds from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act for broadband expansion. This includes more than \$66 million to fund the Connecting Appalachia Broadband Plan which expands broadband into 34 Ohio Appalachian and rural counties. These funds will not only secure expanded broadband access, they are projected to create more than 500 jobs and spur economic development in traditionally underserved areas throughout the region.



Next week during a roundtable with dairy farmers and processors and other agriculture leaders in Wooster, we'll discuss how agriculture remains Ohio's number one industry, contributing nearly \$80 billion to our economy each year and supporting one out of every six Ohio jobs. And as they harness investment in heritage tourism and strengthen the local food movement, our farmers, entrepreneurs, and educators are also preparing our rural workforce for new opportunities in the clean energy economy that Ohio is poised to lead. Broadband access is part of that equation.

We can also strengthen rural Ohio's economy by modernizing its aging water infrastructure. Because of cost and difficult maintenance, rural water systems are more than twice as likely to violate drinking water standards compared to their urban counterparts. It can cost up to four times more for smaller communities to maintain and update their wastewater systems, a particularly daunting challenge in this difficult budget environment.

Our small towns and villages are making strides to meet safe drinking water standards, but we can do more. All Ohioans deserve access to clean water, but too many communities are struggling to afford costly, but necessary, upgrades to sewer systems. That's why Senator Voinovich and I wrote the Clean Water Affordability Act last year to update the EPA clean water affordability policy to provide for a full and accurate representation of the financial impacts clean water investment programs place on communities struggling to meet federal regulations for improving water infrastructure.



As public servants and workers like Eric and William explained, and as our small town mayors and Appalachian leaders know, strong rural communities are essential to Ohio's

economic prosperity and serve as a barometer for our economy's health. By expanding the role of the rural workforce in the clean energy economy and investing in water and broadband infrastructure, Ohio small towns and rural communities can and will play a pivotal role in our state's economic recovery.

Sincerely,



Sherrod Brown



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