

CAN WE START WITH THE STORY OF WHO WE ARE?



**Envisioning Pathways to
Systems Change
in Conversation with
Rural Oregonians**

June 2022



FBO 
**FOUNDATIONS
FOR A BETTER
OREGON**

DEAR PARTNERS,

For many of us, the last two and a half years renewed an appreciation for our sense of place: the places we've missed, the places we share, and how closely we're bound together in this place we call home. As Oregonians, we are inherently interconnected within and across place.

Throughout the state, Oregonians work together in different ways to meet the needs of children and families, support community vitality, and strengthen Oregon as a whole. These differences reflect every community's unique experience and expertise, and contribute to our collective vibrancy and strength.

Yet too often, the differences among us are exploited to disconnect and divide us. It creates an unacceptable paradox: While there is growing interest in the vitality of rural communities in statewide conversations, rural Oregonians themselves are not consistently or meaningfully included in these conversations. Why is this the case? How can and will this change?

Together, we explored the many dimensions of this question with you and other partners across Oregon. These conversations reinforced our conviction that there is exceptional nuance, wisdom, and interconnectedness among the thousands who shape the arc of our state for the better.

From forest collaboratives to childcare hubs, we heard a range of success stories that blossomed from coordinated and united community action. We heard that meaningfully shifting the conditions that hold problems in place, or systems change, emerged when those impacted defined the challenge and informed the solutions. We heard how rural strength, diversity, and collaboration are essential to building a better Oregon.

To fundamentally improve how decision-makers support rural children, families, and communities, Foundations for a Better Oregon (FBO) is leaning into partners' visions of what's needed and what's possible. Our conversations suggested opportunities to demystify systems, strengthen relationships, reframe narratives, and address power dynamics. These opportunities are leading us to explore co-creating a rural collaboration network, leveraging FBO's role as a bridge builder between community, policymakers, and philanthropy.

With deep gratitude to all who joined us during this initial engagement, we invite you to read this summary of insights and pathways forward. While no summary could possibly capture the breadth and depth of perspectives shared, we hope this summary feels authentic to our conversations with you. We also recognize the voices engaged in this early stage represent just a slice of rural diversity and experience. We are deeply committed to ongoing learning and collaboration, and invite all readers to engage with us in this spirit.

Sincerely,



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INTRODUCTION TO FBO

In early 2020, Foundations for a Better Oregon (FBO) launched a new mission and vision, seeking to bridge community, policymakers, and philanthropy to collaboratively advance a better Oregon where every child knows that they belong and is supported to learn, grow, and thrive. FBO's new strategic direction is anchored in our guiding beliefs, which underpin our theory of change and direct how we work.

FBO's **guiding beliefs** include:

- Honoring and building from community wisdom will advance equity.
- Sharing power is key to advancing sustainable systems change.
- Demystifying complex systems is critical for accessibility and conditional for authentic community engagement.

At its core, FBO's mission seeks to create more inclusive and participatory decision-making that guides how elected leaders, state agencies, and philanthropy make policy and resourcing decisions that help children and families thrive. To actualize this strategic priority, FBO set out to practice inclusive decision-making by engaging community members across Oregon directly in shaping our work.

Given FBO's experience as a convener, prior successful network development with child and youth advocates, and ability to coordinate coalition actions at the state level, we see the potential to both support the development of new networks and to build bridges to existing networks, coalitions, public officials, and statewide organizations.

OUR INITIAL ENGAGEMENT

We began our initial statewide engagement in late 2021 with a series of one-on-one interviews. We prioritized conversations with those who live in rural communities, and also spoke with individuals who live in urban settings but whose work is primarily geared to serve rural communities. Thanks to the generous connections made by those we met along the way, our initial phase of engagement led to 47 conversations.

We spoke with folks who live and work in every region across Oregon, and who identify as foresters, farmers, immigrants, Black, Latine, Asian, researchers, business owners, nonprofit leaders, and more. Moving forward, we are committed to continuing to engage more diverse lived experiences. In particular, we want to acknowledge the absence of Indigenous and tribal voices from this initial round of engagement. This work can only truly reflect the nuance of Oregon if it does not engage in the patterns of invisibilization that occur when we speak of rural as a monolith.

Four key questions guided our conversations during this initial engagement:

- What does rural community building, organizing, advocacy, and/or systems change work look like in your community?
- How would you describe the relationships between your community/region and public officials or other statewide organizations?
- When you think of your community/region, what do you consider your advocacy, systems change, and/or community organizing role to be, if any?
- What infrastructure, tools, practices, ideas, or ways of thinking do you think are needed to develop more robust policy or system change efforts?

In order to ensure that we accurately captured what we heard, we invited those interviewed to participate in four small group sessions in spring of 2022. In these small groups, we invited participants to engage in dialogue with us and each other, interpret aggregated themes, react to initial insights, and share perspective on paths forward. Acknowledging that it is impossible to capture all the nuance, perspective and heart that was present in the many conversations, the initial insights that follow offer a point-in-time reflection of some of what we heard. We say initial because we recognize that rural-based voices are many and divergent, and therefore this work will be ongoing. Throughout these initial insights, we have woven in unattributed quotes to elevate the voices of those that contributed, while still honoring the confidentiality of our participants.

To move from initial insights into ongoing learning and action, we thought deeply about how FBO's organizational values and approaches intersect with the analysis and aspirations that emerged throughout our engagement. After outlining possible paths forward, we offer an invitation to re-engage with FBO in a next phase of shared work.

INITIAL INSIGHTS

BUILDING FROM A PLACE OF STRENGTH

Throughout our conversations, participants consistently began our dialogue from a place of strength. We heard about connectivity with neighbors, stories of healing, creative risk-taking, optimistic visions, and powerful anecdotes of transformational change.

Many participants indicated that wherever they see meaningful change happening, these efforts are grounded in growing community relationships, strengthening partnerships, increasing hope, and nurturing capacities for a diversity of voices to engage. In other words, successful change efforts meaningfully connect people, organizations, and ideas to actualize bold possibilities.

Participants shared examples of success rooted in community-led approaches, as well as some cautionary tales. Many pointed out that when efforts are resourced and built from the ground up, they create staying power and transform outcomes for impacted communities. However, participants noted that often well-intentioned public officials and statewide organizations take place-based successes and try to replicate them elsewhere without honoring local context. This results in top-down and often under-resourced approaches that ultimately fail or create new barriers to developing truly local solutions. Without genuine, local and community-rooted connections, well-meaning efforts will lack the organizing human infrastructure to spark and sustain success.

“Those [initiatives] that inspired the [state] strategy are the ones built from the ground up at the community level. They are still going strong and have built meaningful networks.”

Building from a place of strength, participants introduced the need for public officials and statewide organizations to create authentic engagement and more inclusive spaces that honor differences and better meet collective needs. They also acknowledged that real connection and transformation need to include willingness to acknowledge harms—both past and present, within communities and with statewide actors—and take steps toward reconciliation and repair.

“To be heard should not mean needing to translate to urban. In the case of diversity and equity, it feels like you are immediately labeled either as equitable or not. That judgment happens before there is real relationship building, knowledge sharing, or leveling of the language and shared understanding.”

There was also growing concern among participants that the work of facilitating understanding across different perspectives and aligning around the values of “neighbor helping neighbor” is becoming increasingly challenging. Many felt that the very work of building community in rural places is being threatened by external narratives that flatten and frame rural Oregon as only having far-right politics and white racial identity. Such stories create divisions within rural communities, as well as between rural places and more urban places.

“The best of us is reflected when we come together as a community, when we get to know one another. Right now we are needing to relearn what it means to be together, period. We are adjusting to rapid change and to an environment that has weaponized fear to keep us apart at a time when we are meant to come together and heal.”

TELLING AN OPTIMISTIC AND NUANCED OREGON STORY

Participants were clear-eyed about the cultural, economic, and political forces that inhibit connection across differences, and how these broken connections distort a community’s shared sense of the past, present, and future. To directly challenge these divisive forces, small groups raised the need to build a more optimistic rural narrative that encompasses the rich diversity of rural communities and the complexity of rural values, perspectives, and experiences.

Participants felt that the erosion of trust between rural people, public officials, and statewide organizations is aggravated when leadership dismisses racial and ethnic diversity in rural places, or uses oversimplified language to describe “urban and rural” and “progressive and conservative.” When statewide actors and rural leaders do engage one another, the lack of authentic relationships reinforce oversimplified assumptions about differences—or the lack of difference—within rural places or across Oregon, ultimately leading to unintentional harm for all involved.

“The assumption is that rural means an older rural white man who is a rancher; this narrative [being] perpetuated often means we do not think of Indigenous, Black, Latino, Pacific Islander, and other marginalized voices in rural places. That diversity is present across the state and contributes to Oregon’s strengths.”

More broadly, participants described how toxic narratives about division and decay in rural places inevitably lead to an overall pattern of disinvestment or one-off investments in response to acute crises. Many interviewees said disrupting these toxic narratives is imperative, especially when social isolation during the

COVID-19 pandemic has limited public officials and statewide organization leaders from experiencing the strength and vibrancy of rural communities. During this time of social distancing, many public and private decision-makers have only visited in response to wildfires, droughts, floods, or social unrest. These visits, although critically important, can unfortunately reinforce stories of despair and division.

“The stories about rural places dying are entrenched and toxic. In order to believe in a better future, we need to first see ourselves as having a future.”

REDUCING DISTANCE FROM POWER BY INCREASING ACCESS AND ENGAGEMENT

Participants all agreed that access to policymakers and the tables where decisions are made is critical to advancing meaningful change.

“The very idea of rural implies peripherality: It implies a relationship to a center of power. To be rural is to be situated on the outside of social and political power. This is problematic for a number of reasons...”

Given a shared sense of distance from power, some participants described overcoming political identities as a cornerstone of advancing rural change. In a handful of conversations, interviewees reflected on the need to bridge the red-blue divide between political parties and “speak purple” instead.

Others felt that the notion of overcoming the partisan divide ignores the reality: that many people in rural Oregon have been alienated by Republican and Democratic parties alike. In some small groups, participants felt that fixating on the partisan divide distracts from the deeper roots of rural Oregon’s historical and current lack of access to public officials and statewide organization leaders and inability to influence their decision-making, regardless of party affiliation.

Some participants also named that differences are not something people should have to overcome, but that real systems change approaches facilitate understanding across the diverse perspectives and lived experiences of people living in rural places. They described the need to strive for more inclusive spaces—spaces where we can learn from our differences, and accept that identity is not optional for some members of our shared communities.

Finally, when discussing distance from power, we also encountered the notion of rural relativism. Participants described how a person, group, or community’s

perception and experience of feeling distant from power or disconnected from resources is relative across geographies, including within rural Oregon. This notion further breaks down the myth of rural as a monolith, and even shapes beliefs about what places and people are considered to be ‘rural.’

“There are different layers to ‘rural.’ Some people think Klamath is ‘rural’ and yes, it is, but Merrill is much more isolated. We have to make a concerted effort to engage our more isolated communities and not just assume we have their voice represented.”

Some participants mentioned the challenges inherent in engaging diverse voices in their own communities and a desire to reach more unincorporated areas. Many felt that traditional community engagement processes elevated the same voices over and over again, and participants were concerned that local issues were not being informed by diverse lived experiences, particularly when it came to more rural areas of their communities. In tandem, when we spoke with individuals from unincorporated areas, they often felt more connected to federal policy work and relationships because they did not feel represented locally, regionally, or at the state level.

The dialogue throughout our engagement suggests that in order to improve access to power at every level, rural Oregonians need new pathways to building strong and genuine relationships with decision makers. Demystifying how systems work, how to access them, and how decision-making processes flow is key to building meaningful pathways for relationships.

PATHWAYS FORWARD

Throughout this initial engagement, we began unpacking how people across Oregon work together to foster rural vitality. We also began to explore the structural and cultural forces that get in the way of making positive change. Guided by these conversations and insights, FBO sought to better understand what, if any, is our role in increasing rural voice at the state level around policies and resourcing decisions connected to supporting children and families?

At the outset, we were curious to learn whether there might be shared policy priorities around which we might convene and connect. But while most participants articulated the desire to come together for large-scale systems change, no single issue area defined the boundaries of the change that participants seek. Before identifying and elevating shared policy priorities, there is a critical need to recognize rural strength and diversity, disrupt toxic narratives, and reduce distance from power. Interviewees made it clear that these foundational changes are a prerequisite to better policy and resourcing decisions across issue areas.

In summary, **three key ideas** emerged from our initial engagement that could guide possible pathways forward:

- Developing an optimistic rural narrative and nuanced Oregon story
- Strengthening relationships and addressing power dynamics
- Demystifying complex systems and decision-making processes

DEVELOPING AN OPTIMISTIC RURAL NARRATIVE AND NUANCED OREGON STORY

“Can we start with the story of who we are?”

Stories have the power to shape our beliefs about ourselves, our neighbors, and entire communities. We heard from participants that this power has been used to impose top-down narratives on rural people and reinforce mental models that question rural community viability and undermine rural vitality.

MENTAL MODELS are the beliefs and logics that govern how we think the world works, and how we engage with people and the world around us. They guide our individual and collective behaviors, relationships, and decisions, and set the basis for the “norms and rules our society lives by”.

NARRATIVES are the stories we tell to form our mental models. They are shared interpretations of the world that ‘explain’ fundamental ‘truths’ about how the world works. They are also the “stories we tell ourselves about who we are (and aren’t) and how we should (and shouldn’t) act in the world to make change.”¹

Participants described the need for a more optimistic rural narrative—and a more nuanced Oregon story—as foundational to being seen, connected, and feeling like they matter. Unfortunately, media, policymakers, academia, and public discourse often tell “damage-centered” narratives that portray communities as depleted and broken. Disrupting damaging narratives is critical to ensuring decision makers adopt mental models that acknowledge and respect diverse rural voices and strengths, local ways of knowing, and the holistic value of community assets.²

Developing a more optimistic rural narrative also requires us to acknowledge historical and present day injustices, loss, grief, and invisibility and to include and honor community strengths, assets, and desires. These nuanced experiences must include the intersection of race or otherwise run the risk of dividing communities by telling partial truths. By capturing such intersections, Oregon can support a more complex narrative that acknowledges historical injustice and present-day disinvestment, while simultaneously upholding an optimistic outlook for what’s possible by building on rural strength.

Creating a more optimistic rural narrative and nuanced Oregon story will require moving beyond traditional and surface-level messaging campaigns. Such campaigns typically fail to make a dent in mental models that marginalize rural people and places. New affirmative rural narratives have to be developed,

negotiated, and owned by rural people through collective reflection and community-driven collaboration. Reframing rural narratives and elevating diverse rural points of view are rich and necessary opportunities to shift how leaders, decision makers, and all Oregonians understand and engage with rural neighbors.

STRENGTHENING RELATIONSHIPS AND ADDRESSING POWER DYNAMICS

Shifting power dynamics and building relationships across sectors and political divides is essential work in systems change. Most participants mentioned that there was a need to transform the power dynamics between public officials and statewide organizations, and people from rural communities. Interviewees described this work as not just changing the composition of the people in the room, but about creating a safe and accountable space to build relationships and trust.

“I believe in [creating safe spaces to foster relationships with statewide actors]. How do we build relationships so we can have accountability and so unintentional harm isn’t done when folks are in those spaces?”

When asked to define statewide actors, participants expressed that relational work must span across sectors and include rural-serving organizations, philanthropy, elected public officials and other policymakers, government agencies, and statewide organizations. Many participants described feeling largely disconnected from several of these statewide actors and the policies and resourcing decisions that impact them.

In order to improve access to power at every level, rural Oregonians need new pathways to build stronger relationships with elected public officials, other policymakers, government agencies, and philanthropy. Building these pathways requires shared learning with rural partners about the myriad of relevant systems and how they work. It will also require shared learning by these statewide actors to challenge their own assumptions, engage with rural Oregonians in new and consistent ways, and stay open to changing based on what is learned. Sparking and strengthening relationships among people living in rural Oregon, public officials, and statewide organizations will require coordinating new connections, building bridges to engage, and facilitating meaningful dialogue to lead to better collaboration and change.

DEMYSTIFYING COMPLEX SYSTEMS AND DECISION-MAKING

“People often believe advocacy refers only to elections, issue campaigns, and big policies, but it is so much more than that. And to be good at it you need to be active year round. We see a need for improved true advocacy.”

While participants had different definitions and perceptions of “advocacy,” there was a shared sense that decision-making processes need to be demystified. Overall, participants wanted to better understand where and how decisions are made, as well as how to meaningfully engage in ways that truly make an impact on outcomes. This requires real understanding of the systems, players, and decisions at hand, and it requires transparency and authenticity about who ultimately is making the decision. As one participant offered, simply inviting a group of rural-identifying people into a room is not authentic engagement. Confidence in state-level decision-making erodes if people do not know where they are in a process, if they are not given sufficient information to assess the big picture, or if they are unfamiliar with state jargon, acronyms, and varying actors.

Participants also expressed the need to broaden the definition and understanding of advocacy to include not just passing state legislation, but also engaging around administrative rulemaking, implementation, and accountability. Furthermore, participants were interested in learning when and how to engage with influential entities that drive system change like foundations, state agencies, statewide associations, and others. Given FBO’s ties to Oregon philanthropy, there was a particular interest in educating philanthropic leaders about rural community building and changing rural narrative, and potentially convening a funders learning table to build relationships and engage in shared learning.

THE INVITATION

To engage with what we heard, we envision moving forward by supporting the development of a rural collaboration network that has the capacity to hold both learning and action.

NETWORKS are groups of individuals or organizations connected through meaningful relationships that have space for self-organization and that leverage shared learning and connections for collective action. An important component of networks that set them apart from other social change movements is that everyone in the network does not have to see the problem in the same way or share the same perspectives on how to address it. In fact, part of the reason for engaging diverse networks of actors is to gain the benefit of different, and together more holistic perspectives of any given problem.

NETWORK DEVELOPMENT is the work of strengthening and expanding social ties, enhancing access to new and diverse perspectives, facilitating knowledge and information sharing, coordinating action, and supporting awareness and engagement.³

Why a network? In the absence of a clear policy or resourcing priority, forming a coalition or moving directly into advocacy work did not emerge as a clear path forward. Alternatively, a learning community feels limited. A network will hold learning, capacity building, and support actions as opportunities emerge. Additionally, a network calls on the greater ecosystem of rural-serving entities to engage as system partners. A network approach feels critically important as no one organization can do this work alone.

In convening a space for authentic learning and relationship building, we hope to begin advancing some or all of the following objectives:

- **MOST IMMEDIATELY:** Collectively strengthen and expand social ties, facilitate knowledge and information sharing, and begin to coordinate action among rural community builders as a network.
- **INTERMEDIATE:** Collectively uplift rural voice and advance a shared and nuanced rural narrative that challenges divisive frames and mental models about rural Oregon and rural people.
- **LONGER-TERM:** Collectively inform and improve public policies and programs to better serve rural children, families, and places.

We humbly acknowledge that this is only a starting place, and that this work requires sustained relationships and resources. We hope to create a network that is emergent and inclusive; to continue connecting and learning from people and organizations already engaging in the multilayered work of rural community building, storytelling, and advocacy; and to build momentum toward identifying opportunities for networked action and deep systems change.

As we extend this invitation and step into this starting place, we remain deeply committed to partnering with rural people and places to reach FBO's vision of a state where we "forge networks of trust, honor Oregon's complexity and move as one to remedy the historical and emerging injustices facing children."

CONTACT

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ENDNOTES

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3. Stachowiak, S., Gienapp, A., and Kalra, N. (2020, June 24). Not Always Movements: Multiple Approaches to Advance Large-Scale Social Change. ORS Impact. https://www.orsimpact.com/DirectoryAttachments/6242020_35339_970_Not_Always_Movements_Multiple_Approaches_Large-Scale_Social_Change.pdf

PHOTOGRAPHY

Cover (top left): A railroad bridge in Banks, Oregon.

Cover page (center right): Dory boats in Pacific City, Oregon.

Cover page (bottom left): Grain elevators in Biggs Junction, Oregon.

