



More than “Not Urban”: Measuring Value and Impact in Service of Rural Communities

Andy Mink, Director of Rural Initiative
Office of the Under Secretary of Education
Smithsonian Institution

Rural Philanthropy Summit: Celebrating Innovation
Rolla, Missouri • April 24, 2026



Smithsonian
Rural Initiative

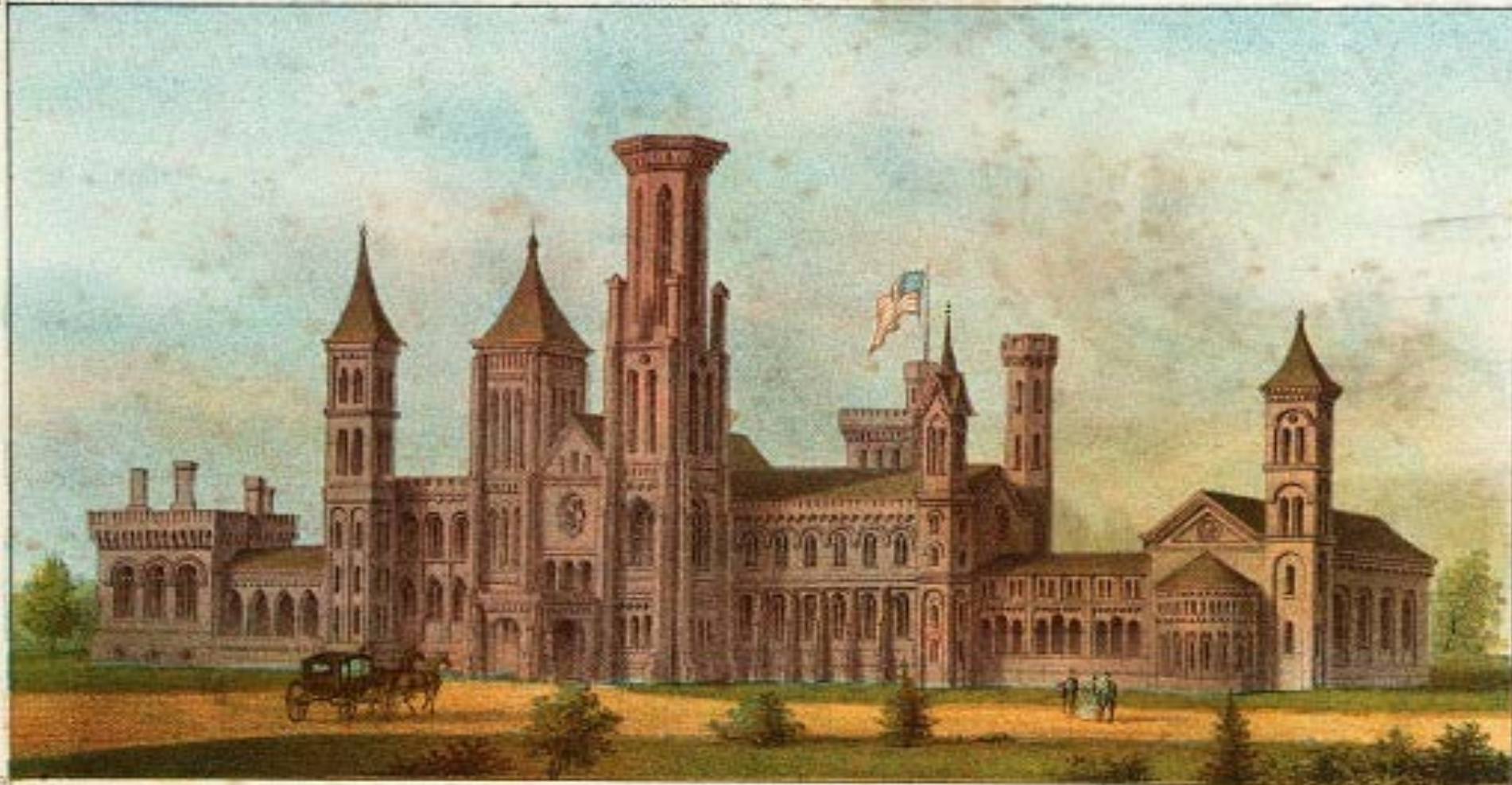


By Henri-Joseph Johns, 1816
National Portrait Gallery

British scientist James Smithson (c. 1765–1829), the Smithsonian Institution’s founding patron. Smithson left his fortune to the U.S. government to establish an institution . . .

“for the increase & diffusion of knowledge among men.”

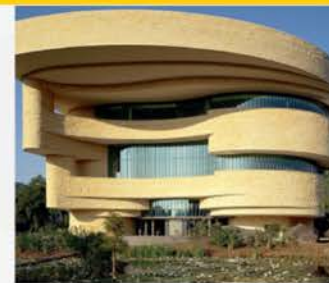
WASHINGTON



Painted by E. Schmitt & Co. Boston.

SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION.

The Smithsonian is the World's Largest Museum, Education and Research Complex







*Explore America
Missouri Collection*

The Nation's Museum (est. 1846)



Smithsonian Affiliates in Missouri

American Jazz Museum Kansas City

**Union Station Kansas City, Inc.
Kansas City**

**Saint Louis Science Center St.
Louis**



Photo credit: Explore St. Louis

Museum on Main Street

(MoMS) engages small town audiences and brings revitalized attention to underserved rural communities, and the cultural histories they encompass through a suite of exhibitions and digital initiatives.

I have lived my entire life with the desire to go to the Smithsonian. Now it's coming to me.

- Museum visitor, Enderlin, North Dakota





*Museum on Main Street
2026 Tour Schedule*

Spark! Places of Innovation

*Voices and Votes: Democracy in
America*

Americans

New for 2028: American Music

Annual Smithsonian Education Outreach



19.6M

Participants in education programs



15.5M

Educator-created publications distributed



3.1M

Educators directly engaged by the Smithsonian



3.7M

Students using SI K-8 science curriculum



560K

Educators & students assisted by the Smithsonian Learning Lab



2,960

Interns, fellows, & research associates



14M

People reached through SITES/Affiliations exhibitions, education materials and programs



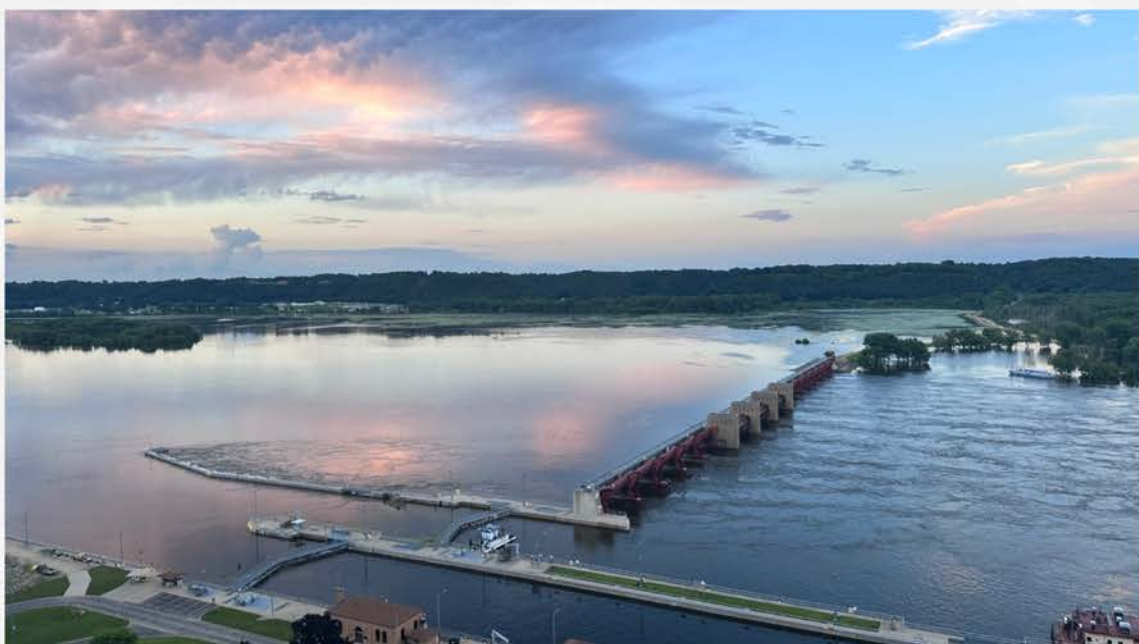
1,189

Schools, museums, & libraries reached by traveling exhibitions in 50 states and 21 countries

Reaching Rural Communities

Smithsonian Rural Initiative Statement

Engage with and **amplify the voices** of rural Americans to better serve local communities, **raise the visibility** of their cultural stories, **exchange resources**, and join in conversations about **our shared future**.



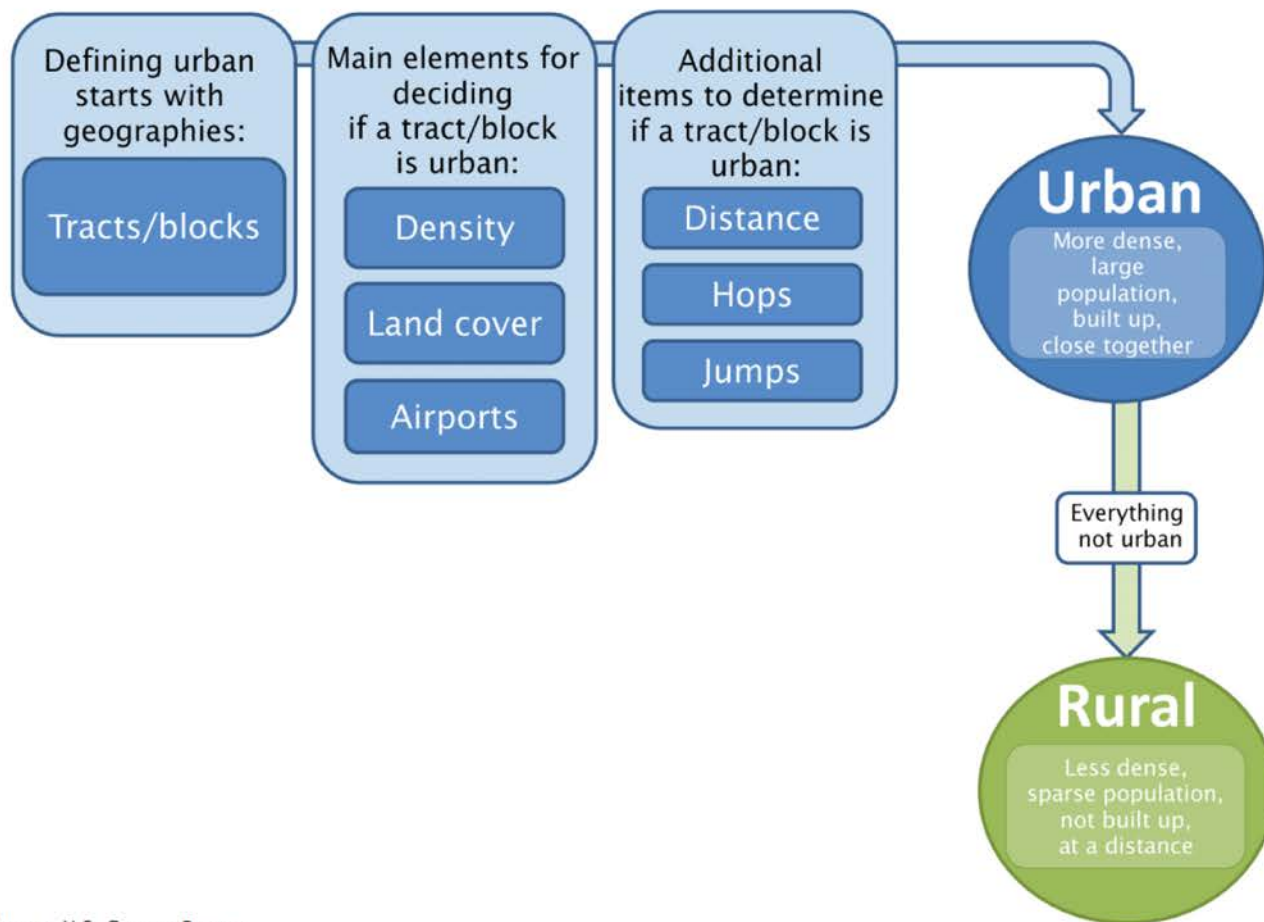
Eagle Point Park, view of Lock & Dam 11, Mississippi River Project, Dubuque, Iowa (photo: Mink, A.)

RURAL AMERICA

What does rural mean?



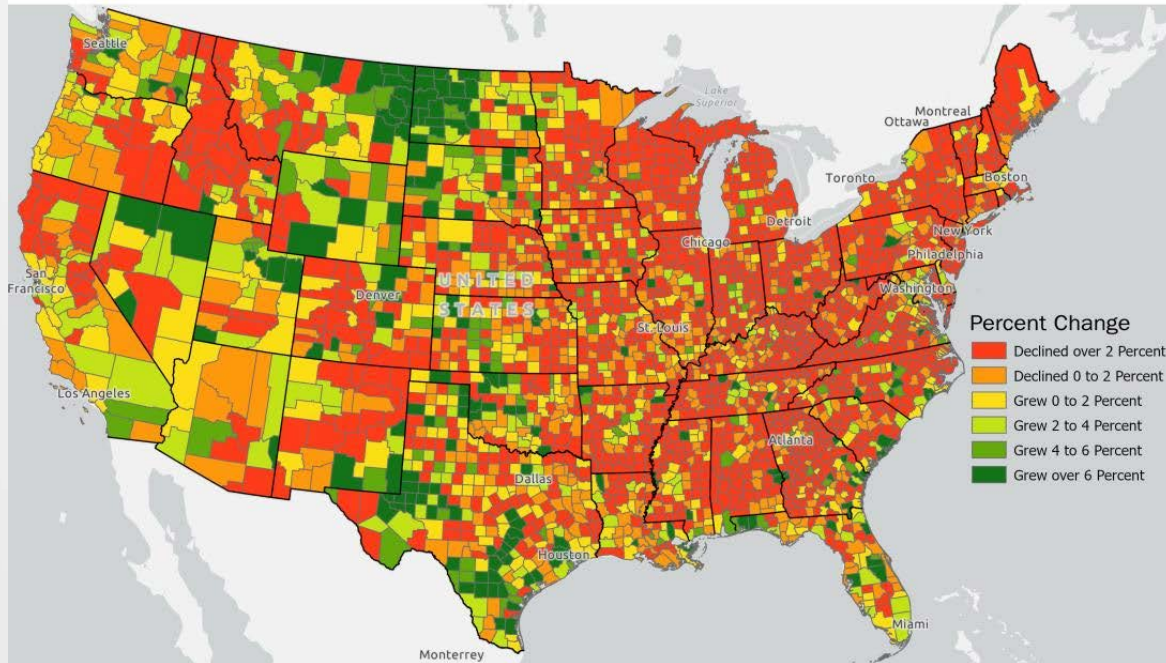
Figure 2.
Graphic Depiction of Urban/Rural Classification



Source: U.S. Census Bureau.

Rural as Place + Rural as People

Change in 25 to 44 Population, 2010 to 2013



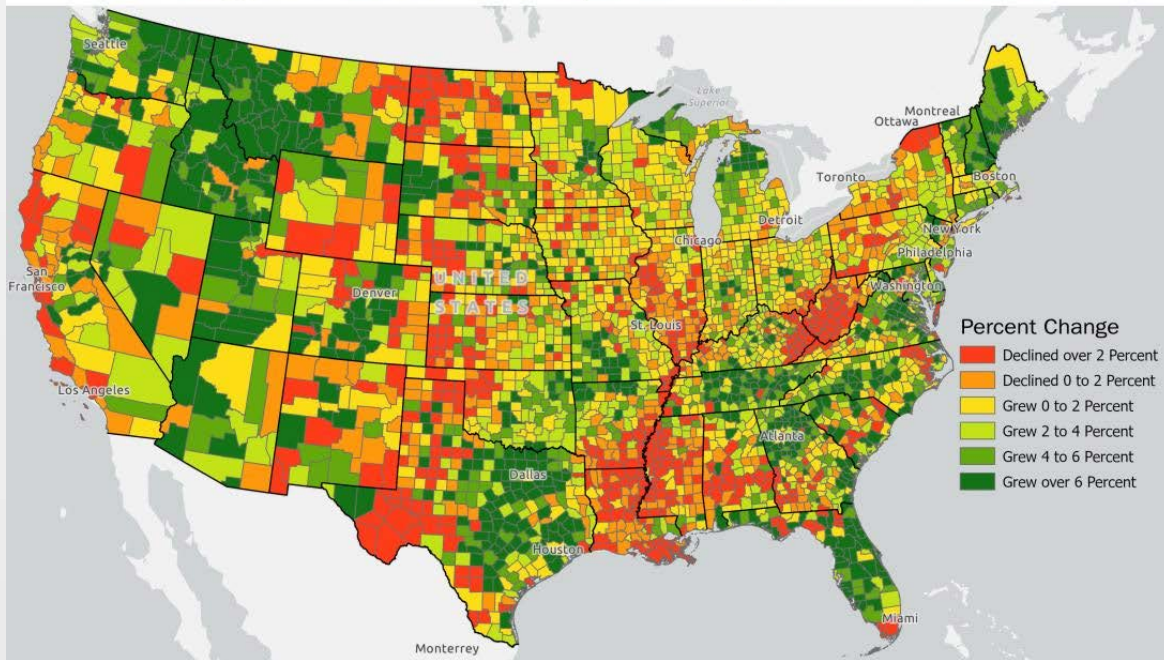
Credit: Cooper Center, University of Virginia

Defining Rural means:

- Acknowledging more than numbers
- Understanding importance of the definition for funding opportunities
- Recognizing diversity in rural places and rural people.
- Valuing self-identification
- **Understanding that rural places change more and more quickly than rural people**
- Asset-based collaboration

Rural as Place + Rural as People

Change in 25 to 44 Population, 2020 to 2023



Credit: Cooper Center, University of Virginia

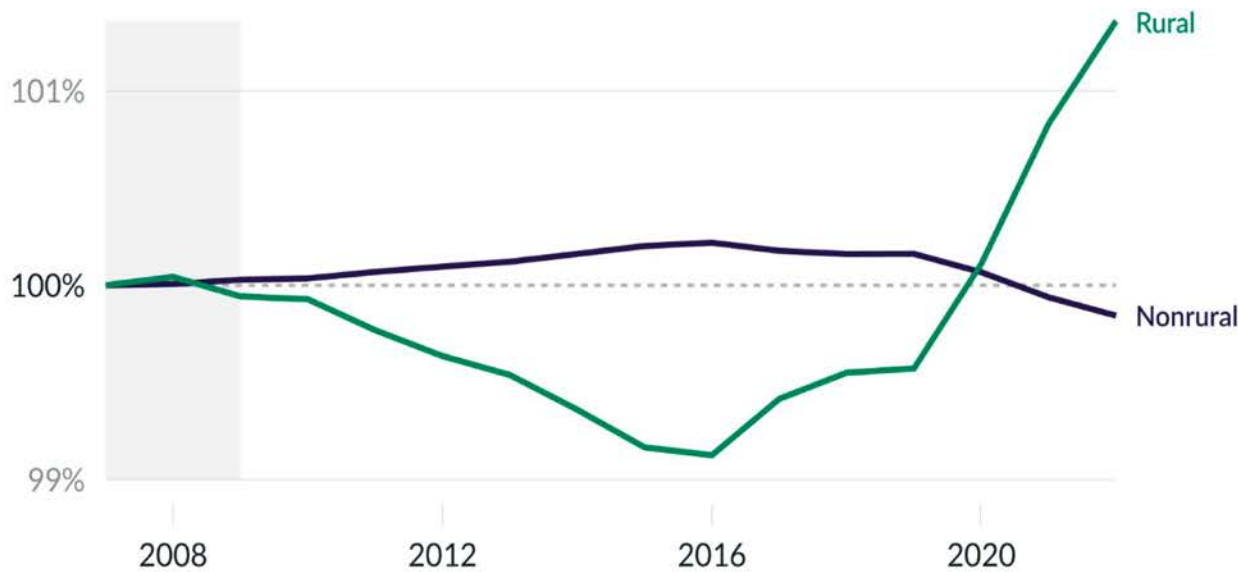
Defining Rural means:

- Acknowledging more than numbers
- Understanding importance of the definition for funding opportunities
- Recognizing diversity in rural places and rural people.
- Valuing self-identification
- **Understanding that rural places change more and more quickly than rural people**
- Asset-based collaboration

Shifting Migration Patterns

Small shifts for Nonrural areas mean big shifts for Rural areas

Relative changes in domestic migration levels since the Great Recession



In an annual survey, **30%** of movers were seeking rural locations

[\(Washington Post, 2025\)](#)

Source: CORI analysis of IRS data (Statistics of Income county-to-county migration data).

Note: Percentages relative to January 2007; shaded area indicates Great Recession (2007 to 2009).

'Rural' refers to the nonmetro definition which includes all nonmetro counties. Excludes international migration.

2020-2025 GREATER NEBRASKA YOUTH SURVEY RESULTS

My peers and I are invited to share our opinions or get involved in town projects or happenings.

TRUE **64%**

FALSE **36%**

I feel connected to the place I live now.

TRUE **75%**

FALSE **25%**

I play a role in this community (ex. you are involved in decision making about the community like events, programs, law making, or projects).

TRUE **31%**

FALSE **69%**

Rural as Place + Rural as People



Mountain Grove, Missouri

Defining Rural means:

- Acknowledging more than numbers
- Understanding importance of the definition for funding opportunities
- Recognizing diversity in rural places and rural people.
- Valuing self-identification
- Understanding that rural places change more and more quickly than rural people
- **Asset-based collaboration**

Rural Needs Sensing Report



Conducting national listening sessions to gain insights into the topics that matter most to rural communities.

70% of Rural Americans have a very/favorable association with the Smithsonian. +5% when understood what the Smithsonian does.

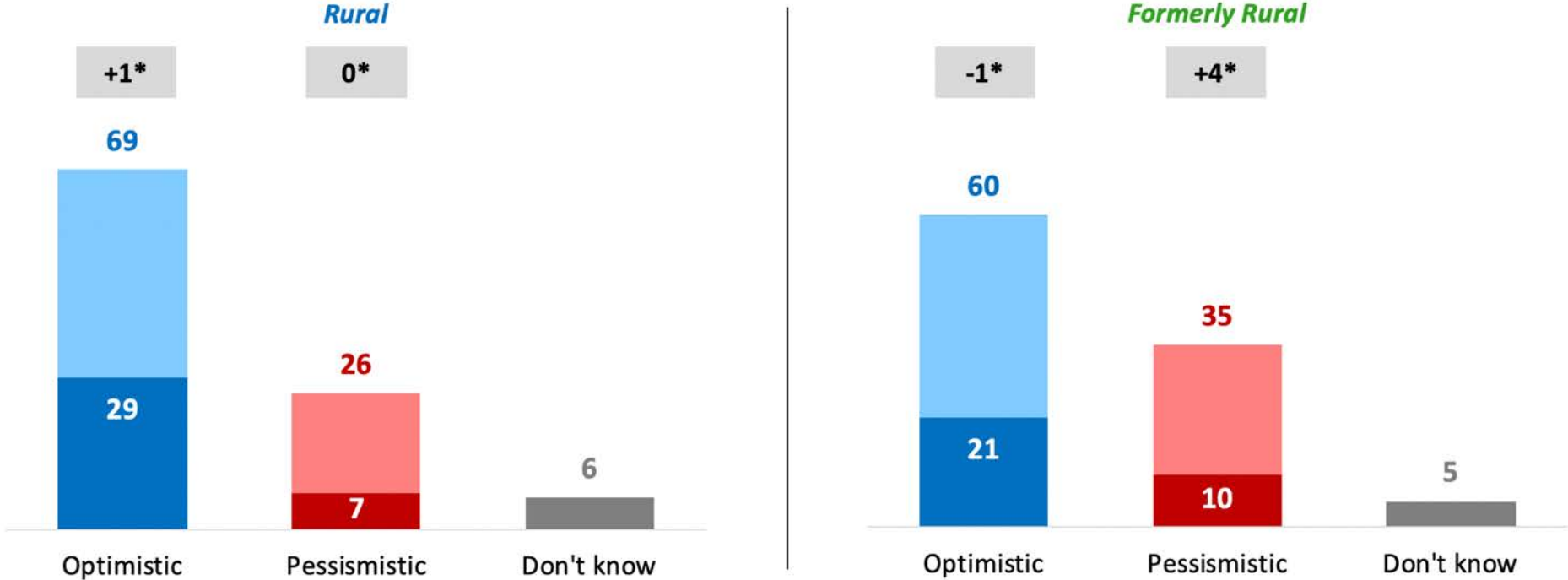
More than **80%** of Rural Americans are interested in partnering with the Smithsonian in a meaningful way.

Rural Americans overwhelmingly express interest in connecting real world experiences and skills with hometown priorities.

The majority of rural Americans feel optimistic about the future of their communities.

Feelings About the Future of Rural Communities

Darker color = Stronger intensity



*Δ from November 2024
Q. Are you optimistic or pessimistic about the future of rural communities in the U.S.?

After learning more about the Smithsonian’s mission and breadth, there is significant interest in its partnering with organizations in their community.

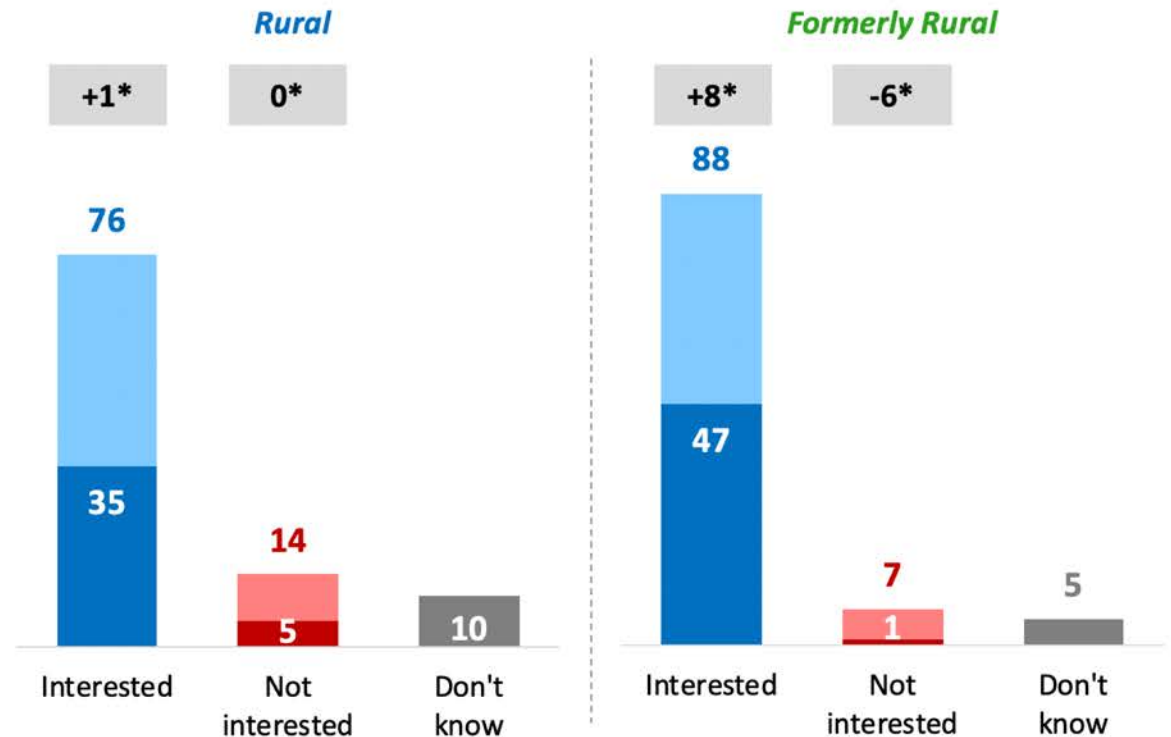
Explanation Provided

Since its founding in 1846, the Smithsonian has evolved to become one of the nation’s—and the world’s—most powerful resources to support and enhance learning.

Featuring 21 museums, two cultural centers, 21 libraries and archives, six research centers, six education centers, and the National Zoo that encompass every part of the human experience—art, history, culture, science—and make connections between artistic expression and scientific discovery, historic achievements and future research, individuals, and communities.

Since the Smithsonian was established, education has been at the core of their identity, building on founding donor James Smithson’s vision for an institution dedicated to “the increase and diffusion of knowledge.”

Interest in Partnership with Smithsonian



*Δ from November 2024

Q. Knowing what you know about the Smithsonian, would you be interested in a partnership between the Smithsonian and organizations and structures in your community?

Understanding your local and family history has significant impact to community health

28% more likely to vote

20% more likely to volunteer and play a leadership role

15% more likely to be interested in national affairs

5x more likely to run for elected office

25% more likely to participate in activities like signing a petition, attending a public meeting, volunteer coaching, or donating blood

10% higher donations in dollars¹

(University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2013)¹



Champion, Missouri
Photo credit: Kaitlyn McConnell



Marshall, Missouri
Photo credit: Marshall Main Street



Spark! Places of Innovation

Impact on Students

Youth feel that their town made a contribution to the American story



Youth feel that their voices are heard and contribute to the town's future



Community Statistics

Fiscal years 2022, 2023, and first half of 2024

193 openings in
34 state tours
in 2.5 years

367,898
Total attendance

1,906
Average
Attendance
per venue

6 Average number of
partner organizations
per community

1,080 total community partners

24
Average number of
programs per community

4,320
Total number of community
programs since 2020

124%
average
increase in
attendance
over previous
year

\$ 3,977,498

total community support since 2022

\$6,866

average in-kind support
per community

\$4,648

average raised funds per
community

\$1,325,138

total value of
in-kind support

\$897,064

total raised funds

286

average volunteer
hours per community

55,198

total volunteer hours

\$1,755,296

total value of
volunteer hours



Rural Needs Sensing Report: Five Key Priorities

Support for Cultural & Environmental Preservation

Access to Art, Culture, and History

Access to Educational Resources and Experiences

Access to Career Readiness Opportunities

Support for Commemorating America 250

Skepticism stems from cultural disconnect, doubts about follow-through, fear of exploitation, resistance to change, and lack of information.

“People are **always wary of ‘outsiders’** because they are not familiar with the **history of the area** and usually want you to learn about their perceptions **instead of them learning about yours.**”

“Trust is not given, it’s earned.”

“**I don't see any progress out of them** - they come in and do money-making fundraisers and collect money from our people, then out the door they go.”

“I am concerned about **‘big city thinking’** overshadowing **‘small town culture.’**”

“They would have to be well-known cause there are a lot of organizations **that would take advantage of small towns.**”

“The only thing that makes me skeptical is **not knowing who the people are** doing the organizations.”

*Rural Leadership Summit, May 28-30, 2025:
Smithsonian Institution*

Rural leadership teams from 18 communities were introduced to and inspired by Smithsonian expertise relevant to these priority areas. This year-long cohort meets quarterly to create and maintain an intercontinental network of Smithsonian-community partnerships.

Photo credit: Jeremy Norwood



*Access to Cultural Preservation:
Bennington, Vermont*

Working with the business, education, and cultural leaders, we are supporting a multi-tiered community storytelling program to focus on resiliency – with a focus on the refugee resettlement population.

Photo credit: Bennington Museum

*Access to Environmental Preservation:
Cleveland, Tennessee*



50 agricultural leaders from Tennessee, Georgia, and Alabama convened to learn about sustainable farming practices and environmental stewardship

Photo credit: Virginia Working Landscapes, NZCBI



*Access to Arts, History, and Culture:
Selma, Alabama*

Working with the business, education, and cultural leaders, we are supporting revitalization efforts of Water Street corridor with a goal of building arts and history opportunities for tourism and economic growth beyond the Pettus Bridge.

Photo credit: Brian van der Brug/Los Angeles Times/Getty Images



*Support for Local Stories of America 250:
Amarillo, Texas*

Working with the Texas Historical Association, the Texas Historical Commission, Texas Rural Funders, and Humanities Texas, we are supporting local cultural organizations as they tell the unique stories of the Panhandle Region of Texas.

Photo credit: National Museum of American History

A photograph of a bison in a grassy field under a cloudy sky. The bison is in the foreground, facing right. The field is filled with tall grasses. In the background, there are rolling hills and mountains under a blue, overcast sky.

*Access to Career Pathways & Opportunities:
Missoula, Montana*

In collaboration with the Great Plains
Science Program and Get a Head Start
Program at the National Zoo, we are
supporting PK – PS education efforts in
western Montana, including the
Blackfeet Native Tribe.

Photo credit: Nature Conservancy



*Access to Educational Resources & Opportunities:
Campbellsville, Kentucky*

University and K-12 education leaders are partnering with the Rural Initiative to provide resources, programs, and opportunities to rural youth across Kentucky and in central Tennessee

Photo credit: Sam Owens, Courier & Press



Current Community Engagement Collaborations

Mariposa, California

Whitesburg, Kentucky

Iron Range, Minnesota

Springdale, Arkansas

Portsmouth, Ohio

Lewiston, Idaho

Kingston, New York

Telluride, Colorado

Las Cruces, New Mexico

Boone, North Carolina

Mariposa, California
Photo credit: Yosemite National Park

A photograph showing three people—two women and one man—kneeling on a lawn in a garden. They are looking at a patch of ground with small white flowers. In the background, there is a large, ornate brick building with multiple windows and a tower. The scene is outdoors on a sunny day.

*First Interstate Bank/Smithsonian
Rural Internship Program*

First Interstate Bank is underwriting an annual cohort of college-aged interns from rural communities in their ten state footprint annually: Oregon, Washington, Idaho, Montana, South Dakota, Colorado, Wyoming, Nebraska, **Missouri**, and Iowa.

Photo credit: National Zoo

The image shows the exterior of a brick building, identified as a Dallas County Public Library. The building has a gabled roof with white siding. The main entrance is a glass door with a sign that reads "DALLAS COUNTY PUBLIC LIBRARY" and "219". To the right of the entrance, an American flag is flying on a pole. The building is surrounded by a gravel area with some small plants and a paved parking lot in the foreground. A speed limit sign for 25 is visible on the left side of the image.

Smithsonian Associates Rural Library Cohort

With a focus on community engagement and life-long learning programs, we are supporting an annual cohort of 12 rural libraries who receive virtual programming from Smithsonian Associates. The full slate of events will build off of engagement activities like community reads and service opportunities.

Dallas County Public Library (MO)

*Boys and Girls Club of America
Rural Network*



BOYS & GIRLS CLUB OF RUSH COUNTY

Working closely with BGCA National Leadership, we are developing and supporting a new Rural Network that will create thriving and resilient rural Clubs by empowering board members, staff, and Clubs to be sustainable, viable, and growth oriented.

Photo credit: Boys & Girls Club of Rush County (IN)



Photo credit: Garfield County 4-H Club

Stories 4-History Youth Storytelling Program

With support from Smithsonian experts, state and local 4-H leaders will guide 4-H'ers to identify a local changemaker that has made a positive contribution to their community and discover how 4-H'ers can use their voice to become agents of change—shaping the future of the places they call home. Franklin County and Macon County 4-H Clubs have participated.



*Preamble by Mike Wilkins, 1987
National Museum of American History*

Democracy in Dialogue Virtual Exchange Program

How has your community played a role in 250 years of the American Experience?

Youth uncover unique story of their community in the on-going American experience – then share that story with a partner community in another part of the country.

Served 247 communities, 4,000+ youth across 44 states to date



Democracy in Dialogue Virtual Exchange Program

Middle school youth in Springdale, Arkansas used photography and object-based research to connect personal stories to broader history immigration patterns. They created a digital story map of belonging on Ozark Regional Transit Routes 61 and 62 that has been adopted by the local transportation authority.

Photo credit: Brittany Berry

...I am my family's legacy.



My object shows my passion and the challenges and perseverance through my family. My tea cup's history goes all the way back to England in the 1920s or 30s. My great great grandma got this from England and cherished it for a long time but when she got older she decided to make it a family object. So she gave it to my great grandma who had it in a cabinet and barely used it because she knew that it holds the past and future in it. My mom said that she kept it in that cabinet for SO LONG. She never told me how great my great great grandma was but all i know is that she was an amazing person. Sadly my great grandma passed away but when she did my mom kept it so she can keep it for even longer. Maybe one day it will go even farther maybe even 50 more years!

Smithsonian as a Public Service



PARTICIPATE IN CURRENT PROGRAMS: Participate in existing Smithsonian programs & opportunities to build collaboration, visibility, and earn trust



AMPLIFY LOCAL PROGRAMS: Identify local events, programs, and goals to leverage Smithsonian support and contribution



CO-DESIGN NEW PROGRAMS: Identify national and regional funding sources to support ambitious new concepts and programs



How Can We Collaborate to Serve Your Rural Community?

Andy Mink
Director of Rural Initiatives
Smithsonian Institution
MinkAT@si.edu

Megan Beck
Major Gifts Officer, Rural Initiatives
Smithsonian Institution
beckm2@si.edu



Smithsonian
Rural Initiative