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Nebraska Bankers Association

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NEBRASKA BANKERS ASSOCIATION
SEPTEMBER 6, 2001
John C. Owens
NU Vice President and Harlan Vice Chancellor, IANR

Thank you for inviting me to be with you today. It is a real pleasure, and I look forward to visiting with you both individually and collectively, now and in the future. I'd looked forward to meeting with you all earlier in the year, but a death in our family took my wife Virginia and me to Texas at the time of your April meeting, so I am very glad to have this opportunity to be with you now.

As a newcomer to Nebraska, the University and the Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources, having been here just over eight months now, I always am eager to talk with Nebraska's residents. I want to know what your hopes, dreams and concerns are for Nebraska now, and in the future. I want to hear what you believe we in the Institute, working in our priority areas of food, agriculture, agribusiness, natural resources, people and communities can do to help address those concerns and make those hopes and dreams come true.

I have spent a great deal of time listening in my first months on the job, and will continue to do so. Since I've always been leery of people who come in with answers before they've really discovered the key questions that need addressing, I

am gathering as much information as I can from a variety of Nebraska residents so I am aware of the key questions we in the Institute, as partners with Nebraska, must address.

I was asked to speak on, "Perspectives on Agriculture and Natural Resources," today, and would like to broaden that slightly to a more inclusive "perspectives on rural Nebraska." I believe the three are so intertwined, with each affecting the others, that it is important to consider all of them.

I'm sure everyone in this room knows the challenges agriculture has faced in the last years, and faces today; those challenges affect all of rural Nebraska in both economic and social ways. People who aren't making much money don't have much money to spend, affecting local businesses. People who can't make a living here move away to a place they can, leaving holes in the community. Good citizens are lost, and there is no big migration into our rural communities to take their place.

This is a concern statewide. It certainly is a concern at the University, and that concern is reflected in our new Rural Initiative, the name given NU's multi-year efforts to work with rural Nebraskans to address the challenges rural Nebraska faces today. One of the things I hope will help us as we address these challenges is rural Nebraska's rich tradition of neighbor helping neighbor.

From the first time people came together to raise barns, schools and churches,

to hay, thresh grain, shell corn, move cattle, brand – neighbors have depended upon neighbors, right up until today.

Harvest time often brings heart-tugging stories about an ill farmer whose neighbors arrive on a given day with combines, wagons and trucks to bring in the crop. Neighbors bring food for the family and those working. Neighbors watch out for the children. Neighbors do what needs doing. Neighbors help.

I hope we never lose the strength of being good neighbors in Nebraska – this strength of caring and understanding that we are all in this life together, that we must come together in emergencies and other times of need, that we depend on each other. I think of that rich rural Nebraska heritage each time I consider the University's Rural Initiative.

This multi-year Initiative, which calls upon the resources of all four University campuses, has farmers, ranchers, small communities, the University, other state agencies, public and private organizations working together to address a need. This time, however, it isn't an individual in need; it's the rural economy and way of life, so important to who we are in this state.

We know that rural Nebraska counties are losing population and jobs. Young people leave for jobs in urban areas, often outside Nebraska. It's as if Nebraska has a two-tier economy, with urban counties prospering while rural counties suffer.

There are fears Nebraska's heritage of prosperous farms, ranches, small businesses and small towns, able to support a healthy, enjoyable way of life for families and people of all ages, is in jeopardy.

The University's Rural Initiative aims to bring resources together, as rural Nebraskans have traditionally pooled resources, to develop and implement strategies to address rural Nebraska's economic and social needs, and to point the way to rural areas' prosperity, sustainability and success.

How?

By working together. By all of us – farmers, ranchers, hometown businesses and residents, University and state agency representatives, public and private organizations – coming together to do some literal brainstorming and figurative barn raising to meet a common goal. I urge you to draw upon the rich resources of the university, which is *your* university, to let us work with you and your organizations, businesses and communities to address the issues we must address so people who wish to do so can continue to make a living and a life on Nebraska's farms and ranches and in Nebraska's small towns.

While the University's Rural Initiative is new, our work in addressing problems faced by rural Nebraskans is not. Certainly the Institute and others have been involved in such efforts for years. A number of existing faculty have indicated

an interest in participating in this systemwide thrust. Unfortunately, these resources are stretched so thin there is no more stretch to meet a multitude of requests for help. And, some of the skills now needed are unique – they don't exist to a large extent among current staff. That's why more help is needed.

As part of the Rural Initiative, the University has identified key areas in which we will focus our efforts in rural Nebraska. They are:

- *business development and entrepreneurship;
- *e-commerce for small businesses;
- *expansion of distance education and expanded application of information technology;
- *telehealth and telemedicine;
- *value-added agriculture and niche crops.

In addressing these areas, attention will be placed on expanding opportunities for young people within the state

To make the kind of progress needed in these areas will require a long-term commitment by both the university and the state. We at the university have made that commitment, even though we know we don't have all the answers and we can't solve all the problems. We do have great faith, however, in the resiliency, tenacity and determination of rural Nebraskans, and we hope that, working with them and

other institutions and organizations in partnership, we all can do our part to strengthen rural areas.

While the Board of Regents approved new funding for the Rural Initiative, we are closely watching the state's revenues, because the slowdown in state revenues and possible cuts in state budgets certainly affect what we in the university can do. If, as we're all hoping, revenues rise and funding is available, this is what it will help us do as a first step in the implementation of the Rural Initiative:

- *Focus on rural economic viability including computer connectivity;
- *Build on a proven track record in health care;
- *Collaborate with K-12 education.

I am going to talk today about the first of those three – focus on rural economic viability including computer connectivity – because that is where the Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources is most involved, and the area with which I am most familiar.

When we talk about "focusing on rural economic viability including computer connectivity," we are talking about an area in which the Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources already is working, and in which we have made significant impacts. But, perhaps because of our success in areas such as small business

development, value-added agriculture, community leadership development and so forth, we find our people in such high demand that we cannot begin to meet all the requests we have for help.

We know that if people are going to survive, sustain and, we would hope, thrive on our farms and ranches and in our small towns, they must be able to make a living. Jobs are important. Expanding the reach of small businesses is important. Finding new ways of adding value to our agricultural products and developing niche crops are important.

As I said earlier, if the state's revenue flow requires mid-year adjustments in state budgets, that very likely will affect the four new positions we hope to hire this year to add additional resources to further the work of the Rural Initiative. We will, of course, move forward as rapidly as we can, mindful of our responsibilities to both the state and our current university employees, and knowing that we do have tremendous resources in the university already willing to contribute as much as possible to this effort.

If state revenues rise, as we all hope, over the next two years we plan to add several people with specific expertise to further the goals of the Rural Initiative, including five new specialists. One, a specialist in enhancing the viability of small and medium-sized farms, will be located on east campus in Lincoln and will work

with four other specialists located at the University's Research and Extension Centers at Scottsbluff, North Platte, Clay Center and Norfolk. These four will be specialists in rural economic development, with expertise in such areas as business development and entrepreneurship for starting or expanding businesses, value-added agriculture and niche crops for economically profitable diversity, and e-business to help Nebraskans figure out how to market not only in our immediate area but also to reach a larger area by doing business on the Web. Why is this important?

Several reasons.

Perhaps several rural counties realize they can multiply their success in meeting a need if they work together – attracting a doctor or attracting tourists to the area are examples of possible needs, and I'm sure you know of others – but they don't really know where to begin. Working with a community and economic developer, they formulate a plan and develop the skills needed to put it into action. Maybe they decide a Web page is needed, to provide information about their area. If seeking tourists, they may decide they need the ability to take reservations electronically.

Or, suppose someone has a small store in a rural community – a hardware store, a drug store, a grocery store all could be examples – and suppose one day the headquarters of the chain that store is affiliated with announces that by a certain

date they will only fill orders that arrive via the World Wide Web. To continue the business, that person must be able to order via the Web.

Here's another angle on that. Suppose someone has a specialty business in a small town in Nebraska – maybe making hand-crafted saddles, or growing good Nebraska beef for a specialty market, or selling a variety of penstemon seeds. In the person's immediate area there is a limited audience for these products, but that person is where he or she wants to be, looking for ways to expand a client base so they can stay where they are, doing what they like to do, being a contributing member of the community. E-commerce – advertising on the Web, taking orders and payment via the Web – may provide an alternative in growing an audience and remaining where they want to be.

To do that, they need to be connected. They need to have the technology options available to make that happen, and so do others in the community. Perhaps having those options will bring others *to* the community, as well.

It takes neighbor helping neighbor to decide what would work best for each Nebraska community and which each might like to pursue, working together.

We've all heard about the digital divide, where some people live in communities with information technology readily available to them, and some do not. I believe that we can bridge that divide, working together. We have redirected

some of the work of eight of our extension educators to serve as resources working with communities trying to build those bridges, but our people cannot begin to answer all the requests for help.

To bolster those efforts and in support of our "Technologies Across Nebraska" work, which is an outgrowth of legislative study resolution LR330, introduced by Senators Bromm and Wickersham in the 2000 legislative session, we hope, over the next two years, to add four new cooperative extension educators – and again, the availability of funding will be key here. These four educators would be specifically skilled in information technologies and community education, and work with the eight I mentioned earlier across the state. They'd also work with community members to help grow the knowledge, skills and abilities individuals and businesses need to make the most of their communities' telecommunications, or communications at a distance, connections.

Some people compare bridging the digital divide and providing rural Nebraska access to fast, affordable Internet and World Wide Web connections with the Rural Electrification Act, which brought electricity and telephone service to rural areas. I'm sure there were people who thought that would never be possible, but people, working together, made it happen.

I said earlier that I'd compare the University's Rural Initiative, involving as it

does the University and other state agencies, as well as rural communities, farmers, ranchers and local institutions, with a figurative barn raising, neighbor helping neighbor toward a common goal.

I see the public service/engagement part of the Initiative, which I've talked in part with you about today, as a foundation for that Initiative. It is a foundation upon which so much more *can* be built, and *will* be built, in the coming years. I hope you will support this work. I hope you will be part of it.

In the Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources we see ourselves as partners with Nebraska. We believe that what happens in rural Nebraska affects us all. We hope you will call upon the many resources available to your communities from NU to let us join you in seeking solutions to Nebraska's concerns. Working together, I believe there is much we can do. Thank you.

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