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SENATE JOINT RESOLUTION NO. 21

Offered January 10, 2024

Prefiled January 9, 2024

Directing the Joint Legislative Audit and Review Commission to study the need for and feasibility of creating a Secretariat of Rural Affairs in the Commonwealth. Report.

Patrons—Aird and Perry

Referred to Committee on Rules

WHEREAS, rural Virginians, on average, experience lower quality of life as measured in educational, economic, and health outcomes and lower life expectancy in comparison to other populations in the Commonwealth, with Black Virginians in rural areas experiencing the greatest of these disparities; and

WHEREAS, in rural areas of Virginia, larger percentages of individuals face lower levels of educational attainment than in urban areas, with fewer individuals attaining a high school diploma or bachelor's degree; in addition, such areas, having lower tax bases than wealthier areas, lack the financial means to attract and retain quality educators; and

WHEREAS, the rate of deaths outpaces the rate of births in rural Virginia, resulting in declines in rural population sizes; rural Virginians demonstrate comparatively worse health outcomes than individuals in urban areas, as larger percentages of rural residents lack health insurance and experience hospitalizations that might be avoided with improved health care; and

WHEREAS, health infrastructure is inadequate in rural Virginia, due in large part to chronic health care worker shortages and the fact that approximately 33 percent of rural hospitals are at risk of closing; and

WHEREAS, metropolitan areas alone account for Virginia's job growth over the last two decades; rural economies experience weaker economic growth than their urban counterparts as they suffer from climbing unemployment, declining wages, and the loss of industries such as coal mining, tobacco, and textiles; and

WHEREAS, rural regions of Virginia encounter higher rates of poverty than urban areas, with a rural poverty rate of 14.9 percent compared to 8.5 percent in metropolitan areas; and

WHEREAS, in some rural areas of Virginia, the majority of residents lack broadband access, which is critical to economic growth; more than 233,000 homes and businesses still lack access to broadband across the Commonwealth; and

WHEREAS, local governments in rural Virginia cannot contribute financially to government service delivery in a manner comparable to that of local governments in suburban and urban regions; and

WHEREAS, the problems facing rural Virginians are interconnected and are distinct from the challenges that face Virginians in metropolitan areas; and

WHEREAS, multiple agencies under different Secretariats are responsible for providing services, funding, and support for rural Virginia, but the Commonwealth lacks a single point of leadership, attention, or coordination for its rural communities; now, therefore, be it

RESOLVED by the Senate, the House of Delegates concurring, That the Joint Legislative Audit and Review Commission be directed to study the need for and feasibility of creating a Secretariat of Rural Affairs in the Commonwealth.

In conducting its study, the Joint Legislative Audit and Review Commission (JLARC) shall study (i) the ways in which existing government entities in the Commonwealth are serving or failing to serve the needs of rural Virginia; (ii) how the creation of a Secretariat of Rural Affairs might improve or streamline rural Virginia's access to housing, employment, transportation, economic development, health care, education, and broadband; (iii) whether any divisions of any of the following Virginia government agencies or commissions, or any other agencies or commissions that JLARC identifies, might be moved, in whole or in part, under the Secretariat of Rural Affairs, and the benefits or potential hurdles of such a transition: (a) the Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services; (b) the Virginia Tobacco Region Revitalization Commission; (c) the Virginia Economic Development Partnership; (d) the Department of Housing and Community Development, including the Appalachian Regional Commission; (e) the Department of Energy; (f) the Department of Conservation and Recreation; (g) the Department of Environmental Quality; (h) the Department of Health's Virginia State Office of Rural Health; (i) the Department of Forestry; (j) the Department of Wildlife Resources; (k) the Virginia Resources Authority; and (l) the Virginia Tourism Corporation; (iv) whether, and how, current funding streams or grant programs that flow to rural communities might be moved under the Secretariat of Rural Affairs; (v) potential staffing models and funding needs for a Secretariat of Rural Affairs, acknowledging that the Secretariat will need expertise across a range of substantive policy areas and a physical presence in Virginia's rural regions; (vi) how the Secretariat of Rural Affairs might partner or engage with groups supporting rural Virginians, such as the Center for Rural Virginia, the Council for Rural Virginia,

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59 or the Rural Prosperity Commission; (vii) to what extent might the scope of authority of the Secretariat of
60 Rural Affairs be modeled off of analogous positions; and (viii) whether there are any alternative structural
61 reforms to state government that might be more effective and more cost efficient than the establishment of a
62 Secretariat of Rural Affairs for improving life outcomes in rural communities.

63 All agencies of the Commonwealth shall provide assistance to the Joint Legislative Audit and Review
64 Commission for this study, upon request.

65 The Joint Legislative Audit and Review Commission shall complete its meetings by October 1, 2024, and
66 the chairman shall submit to the Division of Legislative Automated Systems an executive summary of its
67 findings and recommendations no later than December 1, 2024. The executive summary shall state whether
68 the Joint Legislative Audit and Review Commission intends to submit to the General Assembly and the
69 Governor a report of its findings and recommendations for publication as a House or Senate document. The
70 executive summary and report shall be submitted as provided in the procedures of the Division of Legislative
71 Automated Systems for the processing of legislative documents and reports and shall be posted on the
72 General Assembly's website.