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## **HOUSE JOINT RESOLUTION NO. 461**

Offered January 13, 2025

Prefiled January 8, 2025

*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.*

Patron—O'Quinn

Referred to Committee on Rules

10 WHEREAS, rural Virginians, on average, experience lower quality of life, as measured in educational,  
11 economic, and health outcomes and lower life expectancy in comparison to other populations in the  
12 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, with lower tax bases than wealthier areas, rural 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

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

28 WHEREAS, in some rural areas of Virginia, the majority of residents lack broadband access, which is  
29 critical to economic growth; as of January 2024, more than 233,000 homes and businesses still lacked access  
30 to broadband across the Commonwealth; and

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

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

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

**38** RESOLVED by the House of Delegates, the Senate concurring, That the Joint Legislative Audit and  
**39** Review Commission be directed to study the need for and feasibility of creating a Secretariat of Rural Affairs  
**40** 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 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 Virginia Rural Center or the Rural Virginia Prosperity

59 Commission; (vii) to what extent might the scope of authority of the Secretariat of Rural Affairs be modeled  
60 off of analogous positions; and (viii) whether there are any alternative structural reforms to state government  
61 that might be more effective and more cost efficient than the establishment of a Secretariat of Rural Affairs  
62 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, 2025, 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, 2025. 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.