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1 SENATE JOINT RESOLUTION NO. 23
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3
4Offered January 14, 2026
Prefiled January 13, 20265 *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.*6 7 Patron—Aird
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8 9 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; and13 WHEREAS, in rural areas of Virginia, larger percentages of individuals face lower levels of educational
14 attainment than in urban areas, with fewer individuals attaining a high school diploma or bachelor's degree; in
15 addition, such areas, having lower tax bases than wealthier areas, lack the financial means to attract and retain
16 quality educators; and17 WHEREAS, the rate of deaths outpaces the rate of births in rural Virginia, resulting in declines in rural
18 population sizes; rural Virginians demonstrate comparatively worse health outcomes than individuals in
19 urban areas, as larger percentages of rural residents lack health insurance and experience hospitalizations that
20 might be avoided with improved health care; and21 WHEREAS, health infrastructure is inadequate in rural Virginia, due in large part to chronic health care
22 worker shortages and the fact that approximately 33 percent of rural hospitals are at risk of closing; and23 WHEREAS, metropolitan areas alone account for Virginia's job growth over the last two decades; rural
24 economies experience weaker economic growth than their urban counterparts as they suffer from climbing
25 unemployment, declining wages, and the loss of industries such as coal mining, tobacco, and textiles; and26 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; and28 WHEREAS, in some rural areas of Virginia, the majority of residents lack broadband access, which is
29 critical to economic growth; as of July 2025, an estimated 133,000 homes and businesses still lack access to
30 broadband across the Commonwealth; and31 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; and33 WHEREAS, the problems facing rural Virginians are interconnected and are distinct from the challenges
34 that face Virginians in metropolitan areas; and35 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 it38 RESOLVED by the Senate, the House of Delegates 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.41 In conducting its study, the Joint Legislative Audit and Review Commission (JLARC) shall develop a
42 formal definition of the term "rural" and determine (i) the ways in which existing government entities in the
43 Commonwealth are serving or failing to serve the needs of rural Virginia; (ii) how the creation of a
44 Secretariat of Rural Affairs might improve or streamline rural Virginia's access to housing, employment,
45 transportation, economic development, health care, education, and broadband; (iii) whether any divisions of
46 any of the following Virginia government agencies or commissions, or any other agencies or commissions
47 that JLARC identifies, might be moved, in whole or in part, under the Secretariat of Rural Affairs, and the
48 benefits or potential hurdles of such a transition: (a) the Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services;
49 (b) the Virginia Tobacco Region Revitalization Commission; (c) the Virginia Economic Development
50 Partnership; (d) the Department of Housing and Community Development, including the Appalachian
51 Regional Commission; (e) the Department of Energy; (f) the Department of Conservation and Recreation; (g)
52 the Department of Environmental Quality; (h) the Department of Health's Virginia State Office of Rural
53 Health; (i) the Department of Forestry; (j) the Department of Wildlife Resources; (k) the Virginia Resources
54 Authority; and (l) the Virginia Tourism Corporation; (iv) whether, and how, current funding streams or grant
55 programs that flow to rural communities might be moved under the Secretariat of Rural Affairs; (v) potential
56 staffing models and funding needs for a Secretariat of Rural Affairs, acknowledging that the Secretariat will
57 need expertise across a range of substantive policy areas and a physical presence in Virginia's rural regions;
58 (vi) how the Secretariat of Rural Affairs might partner or engage with groups supporting rural Virginians,

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

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

66 The Joint Legislative Audit and Review Commission shall complete its meetings by October 1, 2026, and
67 the chairman shall submit to the Division of Legislative Automated Systems an executive summary of its
68 findings and recommendations no later than December 1, 2026. The executive summary shall state whether
69 the Joint Legislative Audit and Review Commission intends to submit to the General Assembly and the
70 Governor a report of its findings and recommendations for publication as a House or Senate document. The
71 executive summary and report shall be submitted as provided in the procedures of the Division of Legislative
72 Automated Systems for the processing of legislative documents and reports and shall be posted on the
73 General Assembly's website.