For the three million residents of rural New York, the recent facelift of the state’s leadership raises concerns about gaining a seat at the table in Albany. After all, following the 2008 general election, New York City lawmakers now preside over the New York State Assembly and Senate, and politicians who live within a cab ride of the Empire State Building lead most major legislative committees. Of the new 32-member Democratic majority in the Senate, only two represent a rural district.
Still, upstate New York’s people and communities have a strong ally. On the environmental, economic, and educational fronts, they can look to the Community and Rural Development Institute (CaRDI), an applied research and training center housed in the Department of Development Sociology in the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences that has been supporting rural development across the state since 1990. CaRDI’s programs embody Cornell’s founding land grant mission, with an emphasis on equipping local officials with resources for effective governance and enabling communities and individuals to gain a footing in the new economy.

“To ensure good governance and turn the state around, we need strong training programs at the local level, which wouldn’t be possible without the support of CaRDI.”

—Jeff Osinski

With various partners around the state, CaRDI provides research-based information and training, ranging from the nuances of land use, to economic development enterprises that span multiple counties, to the newly launched Center for Rural Schools, a first-of-its-kind venture overseen by education professor John Sipple to create a hub for information and services meant to improve New York’s 356 rural school districts. CaRDI initiatives share a common vision: to promote civic cooperation that lifts a region or industry collectively; to encourage community entrepreneurship; and to empower local officials and groups through training.

“CaRDI serves as a networker, a convener, and an enabler of informed decision making,” says the institute’s executive director Rod Howe, a senior extension associate in development sociology. “There can be a great deal of turnover in local government, so the continuity of initiatives and strategies isn’t always there. We seek to provide the connections, trainings, research, and data needed for local leaders to make sound decisions without feeling overwhelmed by the process.”

Fostering Informed Decision Making

Through CaRDI, rural New Yorkers also gain a subtler benefit by uniting as a constellation of cities and towns rather than taking a go-it-alone approach, they’re much harder to ignore in the corridors of Albany. At the very least, they won’t suffer the “benign neglect of rural communities,” in the words of Ron Brach, executive director of the New York State Legislative Commission on Rural Resources.

In 2006, Brach and his staff joined with CaRDI and Cornell Cooperative Extension (CCE) to implement the Rural Vision Project (RVP), a bipartisan endeavor to solicit upstate stakeholders about their concerns. During the course of two years, RVP administrators held listening sessions that culminated in a July 2006 symposium in Syracuse: the Future of Rural New York. At the meeting, about 200 participants representing local officials, state agencies, business leaders, nonprofits, and citizen groups
settled on 10 key concerns for rural communities—from agriculture and food systems to health care to schools and youth—and put them forth as a working agenda, which is now used to push for favorable legislation and grants to help grow rural infrastructure.

“Because of the credibility that comes along with being attached to the research and resources at Cornell, we feel secure in advancing this plan,” says Brach, who has already followed the agenda to usher along numerous laws that benefit small communities. “It’s something solid to stand on, and we know we have the backing of rural people since the agenda developed directly from their input.”

CaRDI augments the RVP with a certificate program that educates local officials about the essentials of governing. The Dennis A. Pelletier County Government Institute, formed in 2003 in conjunction with the New York State Association of Counties (NYSAC), offers trainings on government ethics, consensus building, financial management, and other areas crucial to beginning and veteran lawmakers. In many cases, Cornell faculty lead the sessions, which have reached hundreds of elected and appointed officials.

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—Rod Howe

“CaRDI has been instrumental in the development of the institute and plays a major role in connecting Cornell faculty and researchers with county officials,” says Jeff Osinski, director of research and education at NYSAC. “This is a critical time for the state with the budget crisis, and that places multiple demands on local officials to make difficult decisions. To ensure good governance and turn the state around, we need strong training programs at the local level, which wouldn’t be possible without the support of CaRDI.”

Lifting Local Economies

For Howe—and CaRDI co-directors David Brown, professor of development sociology, and Max Pfeffer, chair of the Department of Development Sociology—rural development hinges on regional plans for economic vitality and community growth. As the U.S. economy continues to shift away from traditional manufacturing jobs, the distress is particularly acute in small towns as a younger, college-educated generation flees to urban centers with greater opportunities for work. “Community development and local economic development are two sides of the same coin,” Brown says. “You can’t have one without the other.”

As a result, CaRDI has made economic development a paramount concern. Last summer, the institute gained a three-year extension of its status as a New York State Economic Development Administration (EDA) University Center, a designation by the Department of Commerce. This designation enables CaRDI to build the capacity for economic growth in rural communities. Cornell will receive $150,000 annually from...
2008–2011 to develop applied research, training, outreach, and peer-learning networks in collaboration with partners in central and western New York.

As with other CaRDI projects, the EDA association emphasizes regional, entrepreneurial approaches. To achieve these goals, CaRDI collaborates with CCE’s far-reaching network and other partners, including state agencies and organizations, to facilitate trainings, networking events, and community gatherings to devise long-term economic plans.

With EDA funds, CaRDI—in collaboration with CCE, the Cornell Center for Technology Enterprise and Commercialization, the Cornell Center for Sustainable Global Enterprises, other academic departments, and local business groups—helped launch Pipeline for Progress (P4P), an attempt to revitalize New York’s Southern Tier, a region that shed 2,100 private-sector jobs in 2008.

“Everyone has the same concern for protecting the health of our greatest resources. We have no choice but to work together.”

—Dawn Dowdle

P4P seeks to jumpstart economic development in 13 counties across the Southern Tier and Finger Lakes by highlighting the region’s cultural strengths and branding it as an attractive place to live and work. In addition, CaRDI is studying why young adults stay or leave the region after completing their education.

Mike Fuller, an upstate native and local business consultant, leads the project and stresses the importance of retaining and recruiting workers, especially people under 40. P4P has hosted numerous career trainings and workshops, seeks to solicit opinions about the quality of life in the Southern Tier, and networking events for young professionals. The group will soon roll out a five-point action plan for shores up career opportunities and attracting employers and workers to the region.

“Everyone is competing for the top talent and wants to bring in the best and the brightest,” Fuller says. “We’re trying to create a case for the Southern Tier to be in that mix. We don’t have a large city to build around, so it’s critical for us that individual towns and communities pull together and promote the benefits of our area.”

**Partnerships to Protect Resources**

Dawn Dowdle, town supervisor of Wayne, N.Y., was in her first day of Keuka Lake Land Use Local Alliance (LULA) training in 2007 when it dawned on her: for the lakeside communities, zoning and planning regulations were pointless when done in isolation. Keuka Lake sits as the centerpiece of their region—an economic engine for $20 million in agriculture annually and the source of drinking water for more than 20,000 people. With its steep slopes, the lake is susceptible to runoff so land-use decisions made anywhere in the Keuka Lake watershed could affect the lake.

“You realize quickly that we can’t act alone if we want to preserve the lake for future generations,” says Dowdle, also the chair of the Keuka Watershed Improvement Council. “We must have a coordinated vision if we want to get it right.”

The initial LULA training, held jointly by CaRDI, CCE, and Pace University Land-Use Law Center, brought together local officials and community leaders to learn about zoning law, a thorny area where the state cedes much control to local authorities. Because of the complexity of such decisions, the state encourages municipal officials to undergo land-use training.

Around Keuka Lake, the LULA program—funded by a two-year grant from the New York State Quality Communities Program—has been a resounding success, with more than 100 local leaders better equipped to make informed land-use choices. The group also worked toward shared solutions for the tradeoff between development and farmland, preservation of the region’s rural character, and lake water quality—all issues of concern to Keuka Lake communities. Town leaders are now completing a shared planning guide for the watershed and drafting a resolution to continue working together on land-use issues.

“Wherever you live around the lake, you have a stake in it,” Dowdle says. “Whether you’re a developer, business owner, farmer, or local resident, you have a stake in the lake. Everyone has the same concern for protecting the health of our greatest resources. We have no choice but to work together.”