

# Are you a Rural Champion, and Why Does it Matter?

Craig Schlatter, Community Development Director, City of Ukiah and CALED Rural Exchange Chair

For everyone who has attended a CALED Rural Exchange, you may be familiar with the always-relevant topics, lively conversations among attendees, and the mixture of creativity and grit on display through the varied presentations from rural practitioners. But if you haven't attended you may have also equally thought: what is the Rural Exchange, and why does it matter?

Let's start with the What. From CALED's website: "In May of 2018, the CALED Board approved the creation of a Rural Economic Development Exchange that allows CALED to direct some resources to support our efforts to help rural economic developers connect, share resources, and engage in policy conversations/initiatives."

Over the last 7+ years, CALED has championed issues and initiatives important to rural areas- like CDBG reform, funding access and advocacy, capacity building assistance, and representation of small, underserved rural cities and counties at both the state and federal levels. The work of CALED and the Rural Exchange has had, and is having, real impact.

Okay, you might be thinking, that is pretty straightforward and seems good for rural areas, but why would the Rural Exchange matter to economic developers in large, urban areas?

To help explain the Why, I'll first tell you a bit about myself.

I was a born-and-raised farm kid in Central Illinois. I had a rope swing in a hay loft, a bicycle, wide open spaces, and my imagination, which is to say I had everything but didn't know it yet. I looked forward to the days my dad, Tom Schlatter, would let me ride with him in the tractor or hang out with all the community farmers that

would pitch in to shell our corn crib. But upon leaving Illinois at the age of 18 for the U.S. Marines Corps, I never looked back- until about three years ago when I started visiting the farm in the Fall to assist my dad bring in the harvest.

After dinner on one of these recent trips to the farm, my dad and I got into a spirited debate, as we often do, about why cities need rural areas and rural areas need cities. And this led me to wanting to

share some of his story, as well as why this conversation- and the Rural Exchange- matter.

Tom Schlatter is the owner-operator of Schlatter Farms, a midsize grain farm. Tom took over his father's 240-acre farm in 1975 and over the last 50 years has expanded the operation to nearly 1,300 acres of mostly conventional corn and soybeans but also some organic wheat. Tom's grandparents, the first generation of the Schlatter farming operation, were immigrants from Switzerland. Upon their arrival in New York, the Schlatters moved west to Central Illinois, working as hired hands and laborers, before saving enough to buy a small acreage and start the farm.



*Tom Schlatter, with son Craig Schlatter at the Schlatter Farm homestead in Illinois.*

In the 1920s, one or two families with all family members working might farm 50 acres and supply enough food for themselves and up to six non-family members. Advancements in technology over the last 100 years have enabled farmers to move well beyond subsistence farming, and today the average midsize commercial farms produce enough grain to feed 1,000 or more people. Only 1-2 operators are needed to farm large acreages with high horsepower tractors and agricultural implements.

Tom never planned to take over the farm. And although he enjoys the work and lifestyle now, Tom first started farming to make a living. When asked what has led to his success over the years, Tom noted that non-prejudice in financial and economic decision-making was key. "You can't let what you wish cloud your thinking and bias you on a financial decision."



*Schlatter Farm homestead at dusk, October 2025.*

## ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT IN ACTION

*This is where you can share your personal experiences, local perspectives/projects/programs, and lessons learned in your local community. Email Helen Schaubmayer at [helen@caled.org](mailto:helen@caled.org) with your article for consideration.*



*Tom Schlatter harvesting field corn with the combine, while Craig Schlatter pulls the auger cart with a tractor alongside the combine.*

Tom also listed patience; the ability to build and keep relationships; and having an understanding and respect for nature.

“I like to say I raise one hundred million little babies each year,” chuckles Tom, referring to the corn and soybean plants he grows for harvest. “Every business is unique, and every farm is unique also.”

Rotating the globe and zooming in on the City of Ukiah, population 16,607, in Mendocino County, CA, finds an example of a small city supporting a rural, agriculturally-based population and vice-versa. The City of Ukiah is the county seat for Mendocino County and economic hub for an area from northern Sonoma County to southern Humboldt County, and east to Lake County, regularly attracting a daily visitor population of at least double the City’s population. In addition to a community college, Mendocino College, which provides training in Agricultural Sciences and related agribusiness courses, Ukiah’s economy features a mixture of retail, government services, financial services, and agriculturally-based businesses.

A “full-service” city, the City of Ukiah provides regional public services and amenities to much of the Ukiah Valley. As noted in a November 19, 2025 Local Works article of the League of California Cities *Western City Magazine*, “Ukiah is also the county’s entertainment hub. Each Sunday in the Park concert attracts more than 4,000 people. Ukiah’s annual Pumpkinfest draws more than 15,000 visitors...All these activities serve a dual purpose — fun and community-building.”

Sage Sangiacomo, ICMA-CM, City Manager of Ukiah, sees rural areas and cities not as separate entities competing for resources but instead partners building and sustaining a regional economy. “Providing high-quality services within and beyond our city borders is not only good for our regional economy, it’s the right thing to do,”

states Sangiacomo. “Strong cities need strong counties, and strong counties need strong cities.”

So why does the Rural Exchange matter? It is about much more than connecting rural areas to resources and advocating on policy. The Rural Exchange supports rural economic developers in bolstering regionally-based economies, which is partly about preserving and sustaining food production and agribusiness and partly about strengthening the cities that supply the labor, innovation, talent, housing, services, and amenities.

Rural and city folk are also not all that different nowadays. When Tom is not in the fields, for example, he is studying the financial markets and coaching and mentoring his employee. “Relationships matter,” says Tom. “You have to have confidence in the competence of the person you want to build a relationship with.” This is something economic developers of all stripes know all too well. We also all know about the importance of flexibility, adaptability, open-mindedness, patience, persistence, and being a constant cheerleader for our communities.

So maybe the real question you should be asking is:

Are You a Rural Champion?

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