

2002 Annual Report Executive Summary

Southernmost Illinois Delta Empowerment Zone

Rural leaders understand very well that ground must be prepared and seeds nurtured before a crop can be harvested. Successful community development projects require many steps from the idea phase to the ribbon cutting. For building projects, multiple sources of financing must be secured, land purchased, architects selected, plans drawn, environmental clearance obtained, contracts bid and sites prepared before the first ceremonial shovel of dirt is turned and construction actually begins. Non-construction programs also require planning, financing, and very often, recruitment and training of volunteers or staff to carry out program activities. During 2002, units of government, not-for-profit corporations and individual business owners in the Southernmost Illinois Delta Empowerment Zone (SIDEZ) saw many of their community development dreams turned into reality. Seeds planted during the first four years of zone designation sprouted, some blossomed and others bore fruit. New seeds were planted. During the year, more than a hundred individual projects were completed.

The following paragraphs highlight a few of the many activities carried out during 2002 in support of the seven goals of the SIDEZ Strategic Plan:

Goal #1 Infrastructure Accomplishments: An additional 12.58 miles of gravel roads were upgraded to an oil and chip surface, bringing the total to over 76 miles of roads upgraded since zone designation. Water lines were extended to additional families in rural areas. Alexander County performed preliminary work for re-entering the national flood insurance program, a step vital to the county's ability to grow and develop.

Goal #2 Economic Development Accomplishments: SIDEZ closed fourteen new low interest business loans during 2002 that created or retained 116 jobs. The zone borrowed an additional \$500,000 from USDA Rural Development to recapitalize the Intermediary Relending Program (IRP). A \$9,000 grant from Illinois Workforce Advantage will be added to the micro enterprise loan pool. Pulaski County also recapitalized their IRP fund and Johnson County made their first IRP loan to a zone business. Sixty-three adults and youth completed entrepreneurship training. Each Subzone employed a project manager to work with business prospects. Each Subzone purchased industrial land. Johnson County 2000 completed site work on a 30-acre industrial site that will house a new speculative building. Pulaski County secured a \$710,000 Public Works grant from the Economic Development Administration to construct a business incubator. Alexander County began laying the legal and political groundwork for designation of Cairo as a port of entry and duty free trade zone.

Goal #3 Tourism Accomplishments: Tourism sites were marketed successfully in a variety of ways during the year. The Southernmost Illinois Tourism Bureau responded to 2200 requests for information about the zone from an advertisement placed in a regional tourism publication. New billboards and directional signs were erected. The Horseshoe Lake Waterfowl Association developed a new website. Significant historical and natural resources were preserved and enhanced. The Forman Depot, the last remaining train depot in Johnson County, was restored as a tourism welcome center in Vienna City Park. Repairs were made to the Thebes Courthouse and wells were installed to preserve wildlife habitat and viewing at Horseshoe Lake Conservation Area. Thebes had the distinction of being the smallest town in the nation to host the traveling replica of the Vietnam Wall. The Thebes Junior Fire Department conceived the idea and raised funds to bring the "Wall that Heals" to the zone. Nearly nine hundred people of all ages and abilities participated in the second annual Johnson County Olympics. Tourism volunteers began planning local events for the 2003 Lewis and Clark Bi-Centennial.

Goal #4 Stronger Unity/Sense of Community Accomplishments: Operation Facelift/Take Pride in the Zone, a community clean-up program, reached full swing in 2002. Forty-six derelict abandoned structures were removed and the ground leveled for redevelopment. The program provided significant employment to local demolition contractors. A new community park was constructed on land cleared of blighted structures in the unincorporated community of Villa Ridge. Fifty citizens attended a workshop to learn how to conduct a successful recreation program. Eight organizations subsequently sponsored summer recreation programs. Activities ranged from sports, computer training and cultural field trips to participation in an archeological dig. The City of Mounds constructed a new ballpark and offered a summer baseball program for the first time in 20 years. Numerous other communities improved ballparks, libraries, sidewalks and community centers for citizen use. Nearly 250 persons attended a celebration to honor "Communities on the Move" sponsored by USDA and SIDEZ. Deputy Under Secretary for Policy and Planning with USDA-Rural Development Gilbert Gonzalez and former Congressman Illinois Glenn Poshard were guest speakers.

Goal #5 Life-long Learning & Education Accomplishments: SIDEZ expanded its successful "education mini-grant" program. Twelve organizations sponsored innovative educational programs that served residents of all ages. Offerings included intergenerational programs, a history symposium, environmental education and a community capacity building series. The second annual Johnson County Story Telling Festival won a Governor's Hometown Award for Volunteerism. "Fish Tales," a fishing education program, won a Forest Service award. Each of the seven school districts in the zone operated after school community learning centers. Programming was tailored to each district's needs. Community access to computer technology was enhanced with the opening of a new state-of-the-art computer lab at the Regional Office of Education building in Cairo. Computer resources were also enhanced at Cypress Grade School and Vienna Public Library.

Goal #6 Housing Accomplishments: Each of the three counties in the empowerment zone received \$2 million in tax-exempt bond cap from the State of Illinois to offer low interest 30 year fixed rate mortgages to first time homebuyers. The counties ceded the bond cap to the Illinois Housing Development Authority to administer the housing program and USDA-Rural Development offered homeowner counseling to prospective homebuyers. New housing unit construction included an 8-unit supported living facility for elderly and disabled residents constructed by Family Counseling Center in Vienna and four new single-family low-income housing units under construction by the Alexander County Housing Authority.

Goal #7 Health Care Accomplishments: Preventive health care received new attention during the year. New diabetic education and public access defibrillation programs were established. Pulaski County broke ground on a new centrally located ambulance base after securing all necessary funds. Johnson County purchased new ambulance equipment.

It is evident from these accomplishments that the empowerment zone initiative has touched thousands of citizens during the year. Significant progress was made in implementing SIDEZ's comprehensive strategic plan. While not every citizen is aware of the zone and his or her opportunity and obligation to participate, the number of zone citizens that are taking an active role in their communities bodes well for the area's future. Groundwork has been completed for several projects that will bear fruit in 2003. A new business incubator and speculative building will be constructed. SIDEZ will host the Lewis and Clark Corps of Discovery, bringing national media attention and thousands of tourists to the empowerment zone. An economic analysis of the zone will be completed and the zone will begin marketing to targeted industries. New entrepreneurs will be trained. Additional derelict properties will be torn down and the lots will be prepared for redevelopment. While financial uncertainty and world events threatened the zone as 2002 came to a close, the hope and optimism of citizens in the zone had not been dimmed. Leaders in the Southernmost Illinois Delta Empowerment Zone will continue to sow and tend the seeds

of change that will ultimately bring self-sufficiency and economic prosperity to the area.