

## **2002 Annual Report Executive Summary**

### **Southwest Georgia United EZ (formerly Crisp Dooly EC)**

The Southwest Georgia United EZ realized many accomplishments in 2002 as citizens and local officials pulled together, working side by side to achieve benchmarks and agreed-upon goals. Their hard work and dedication continue to bring about significant improvements in the quality of life for those who work or reside in the Southwest Georgia United Empowerment Zone. Through the diligent collaborative efforts of our Empowerment Zone communities, more than \$17.6 million were obtained from sources other than the empowerment zone grant funds to provide funding for more than 20 local activities. Included in that figure is over \$1.5 million leveraged by the SWGAUEZ from other sources on behalf of the empowerment zone communities. The SWGAUEZ also awarded 16 empowerment zone grants totaling \$1,094,629 to community organizations during 2002.

Brick and mortar projects in Dooly County included start-up construction of a new elementary school and a new Department of Family and Children Services building, and completion of a new Senior Citizens Center. Funding was also obtained to begin construction of a Family Resource Center in Crisp County, and for water and sewer infrastructure at a new Industrial Park in Crisp County. Community renovations and improvements that were funded, begun, or completed included renovation of a tourist train depot, downtown sidewalks and lighting in Cordele, and construction of handicap ramps and other accessibility improvements throughout the empowerment zone. The Dooly County Volunteer Fire Department was able to purchase two new fire trucks, and funding was awarded for water and sewer improvements in Byromville. Dooly County's transportation system expanded to provide service to all of Crisp County. Local tourism received an exciting boost when an excursion train was brought to our community by the Department of Natural Resources, and by the construction of a 75-bed lodge to enhance an existing convention center at Lake Blackshear .

All of the SWGAUEZ community's achievements, accomplished by assistance from or as a part of the Southwest Georgia United Empowerment Zone, were included in the communities' strategic plan under seven broad goals: Agricultural Building Blocks, Community Capacity and Volunteerism, Educational Training: Programs for Life, Quality of Life (Tourism, Culture, Recreation, Business Incubation), Quality of Life (Home, Work, Family), Government-Community Cooperation, and Medical and Social Opportunities. The following are examples of the SWGAUEZ communities' accomplishments.

**Agricultural Building Blocks:** AgAmerica Empowerment Agency, Inc. expanded the inventory of its Equipment Library program by adding additional equipment designed for use in conservation tillage and other improved practices on row-crop farms. The new strip-till equipment addresses the soil and moisture conservation concerns successive years of drought have created, as well as allowing farmers in the SWGAUEZ to rent the equipment at low cost, thereby providing a cost-reducing alternative in micro-management.

**Community Capacity and Volunteerism:** Much of the success of the new excursion train is due to the participation of community volunteers. Excursion train volunteers play a key role in providing optimum customer service and educating passengers about the communities, train, and places to visit in the area. Community volunteers, along with staff members of Bright Future Youth Center and the SWGAUEZ, also began planning to establish Boys and Girls Clubs in both Crisp and Dooly Counties. In Leadership activities, the Dooly County Chamber of Commerce began planning for its second leadership class to begin in 2003, and the Crisp Chamber of Commerce recommenced its leadership class after a three-year break. Each Chamber received \$5,000 in leadership funding from Georgia Rural Development Council. The Empowerment Zone has also been awarded HUD funding which includes a youth leadership

component as a part of the Youthbuild program that will be implemented in early 2003. USDA provided other community capacity building funding through a Rural Community Development Initiative (RCDI) grant. These funds will address several benchmarks in the Empowerment Zone strategic plan, including affordable housing, public transportation, sustainable agriculture, adequate healthcare, entrepreneur and small business development, and sustainable development and coordinated services for families.

**Educational Training: Programs for Life:** Darton College , an accredited community college, opened a satellite campus in Cordele in Spring of 2002. The program far exceeded its initially expected enrollment. By its third quarter of operations, the school had nearly achieved break-even status. Big Brothers Big Sisters of South Georgia served a record number of children during 2002—176 matches, an increase of 58 matches from 2001. A S.T.A.R. (Student Transition and Recovery) program continued in Dooly County and Crisp County .

**Quality of Life (Tourism, Culture, Recreation, Business Incubation):** The 50,000 square foot business incubation center held its grand opening, and a business revolving loan fund was established to assist those businesses located in the facility. The community significantly improved its tourism facilities and opportunities during 2002 with the completion of the Retreat at Lake Blackshear and the SAM Shortline Excursion Train. Cordele sidewalks were improved to make them wider and more handicap accessible, and cross-walk signs and attractive lighting were installed along Seventh Street in downtown Cordele. Dooly County recreational facilities received funding for an additional staff member, as well as upgrades to existing ball fields, including new lighting, fencing, and the purchase of additional recreational equipment. Cultural heritage education and tourism programs were added to the curriculum in Dooly elementary schools.

**Quality of Life (Home, Work, and Family):** Planning for the construction of up to 10 affordable housing units has begun after the Cordele Housing Authority received a \$600,000 grant from the Georgia Department of Community Development. The Empowerment Zone received a \$400,000 grant from the HUD Rural Housing and Economic Development (RHED) program to support the community's efforts to eliminate poverty housing. A revolving loan fund was created, and two full-time housing positions have been created in existing community organizations to support the housing initiative. Crisp Area Habitat for Humanity completed its 13th house. Three affordable houses will be completed at the completion of the Empowerment Zone's Youthbuild program, for sale or rental to low-income families. Youthbuild combines youth development, leadership, and affordable housing construction in a program geared to grow young adults toward economic self-sufficiency through employment or by pursuing additional education. A 24-hour day care center became fully operational and stands ready to offer extended hours of operation. In the area of public safety, the Dooly County Volunteer Fire Department was awarded funds to purchase two fire trucks, and fire prevention awareness materials were purchased for issue to local school children. Also, groundwork was laid for the creation of a regional E-911 system that will serve the whole of seven counties and create approximately 30 new jobs.

**Government-Community Cooperation:** Dooly County's only public transportation service expanded its operations into Crisp County, and was awarded by the Dooly Chamber of Commerce "2002 Small Business of the Year."

**Medical and Social Opportunities:** The Georgia Office of Rural Health Services held a ribbon cutting ceremony for their expanded offices in Cordele. Two residential group homes were opened in Dooly County. These group homes offer residential living opportunities for mentally challenged adult women, who receive appropriate supervision by qualified caregivers. A healthcare initiative was begun to establish a Community Health Center in Dooly County to provide primary health care and other medical services to individuals regardless of ability to pay. The Crisp County Commission was awarded \$500,000 in CDBG grant funding to build a 5,000 square foot Family Resource Center in Crisp County.

The Empowerment Zone communities have overcome many obstacles to realize the goals in the Empowerment Zone strategic plan. The community continues to struggle with its present obstacles, including the loss of the Homestead Homes manufacturing plant in Cordele in December 2002. There is still much work to be done, but the determination of our community members is equal to the task of bringing our rural community triumphantly into the 21st century. The efforts we put forth now and in the coming years to reach our goals for the betterment of our EZ communities are not only for ourselves, but also for our children, and their children's children. Through our continuing work, we will create a better tomorrow.

The Southwest Georgia United Empowerment Zone will assist the community by:

- Working to establish an effective business incubation program and establish a Community Development Financial Institution or similar financial organization to provide funding opportunities for small businesses,
- Supporting the communities' efforts to eliminate poverty housing and provide decent affordable housing for all of the Empowerment Zone residents,
- Seeking additional funding opportunities and assisting community organizations to locate funding, and
- Providing technical assistance and leadership training to local organizations.