

2003 Annual Report Executive Summary

Southwest Georgia United EZ (formerly Crisp Dooly EC)

During 2003, the Southwest Georgia United Empowerment Zone and the EZ community continued to demonstrate their ability to set and achieve goals through the collaborative efforts of the community as a whole. According to Dr. Rick Wetherill, national head of the rural Empowerment Zone program, the Southwest Georgia United Empowerment Zone can serve as a national model for other rural Empowerment Zone programs. The USDA used the Empowerment Zone staff and community to provide technical assistance to a neighboring community.

Most Significant Accomplishments: During 2003, the communities of the Empowerment Zone made significant progress toward the goals set in their common strategic plan. The Southwest Georgia United Empowerment Zone community process continued to achieve effective, positive, measurable results. The Empowerment Zone added a 328-acre developable site located in an industrial park in Cordele. The community obtained over \$15 million in public and private funds to support economic and community development. Seven construction projects were completed and eight others were started. Twelve new businesses, organizations, and programs were created and began operation. More than six existing businesses and organizations increased their capacity and their services. A developer received a \$1 million Low Income Housing Tax Credit allocation to assist in the creation of affordable housing in the community. The Empowerment Zone operated or assisted in eight varied leadership programs serving nearly 100 persons, including four youth leadership programs, and managed, supported, and participated in over 25 community outreach and education events.

Funding:

The community obtained public and private funding of over \$15 million during 2003. The EZ successfully obtained competitive grant funds totaling approximately \$1.3 million for community projects and development of community organizations' capacity. These competitive funds were received in addition to its Empowerment Zone grant of approximately \$1.9 million. Other community businesses and organizations generated and received approximately \$12 million in federal, state, and private funding and investment for various projects and initiatives. The Empowerment Zone made twenty-four (24) sub-grants from the Empowerment Zone funds to community organizations, a total of approximately \$1.2 million.

Construction and Equipment:

The new Dooly County combined Elementary and Middle School, the new Dooly County Department of Family and Children Services building, the Vienna and Dooly County Senior Center (benefiting 713 persons), and the new Travel Plaza in Pinehurst were completed in 2003. Construction was completed on the renovation of a tourist train depot, downtown sidewalks and lighting in Cordele, and the ribbon cutting for the Depot was held February 28. Unadilla completed a drainage project benefiting 242 persons, using CDBG funds. The Crisp County-Cordele IDA completed some improvements to the

MBM manufacturing facility and continued construction of rail spur improvements to the US Timber/Southeast Forest Products facility. Construction began on the Cordele Family Resource Center, and three new retail developments in Crisp County and on a commercial Travel Plaza in Vienna. Renovations and improvements began on the Cordele State Farmers Market to support tourism. Planning began to convert the building that housed the Vienna Elementary School to provide additional space for county government and a separate building for a Dooly County Family Resource Center. The cities of Cordele and Vienna supported over \$40,000 in façade renovations. The Unadilla Fire Department was awarded a \$67,500 federal grant for a firefighting vehicle, and the City of Unadilla will provide a required local match of \$7,500.

Community Capacity:

The Empowerment Zone Corporation provided four training sessions during the year on grant writing, Board development, grant record keeping and bookkeeping, and USDA grant funds programs. The Cordele-Crisp IDC added a contract grant writing position through funds generated by the Empowerment Zone. Seven Empowerment Zone residents completed the Georgia Academy for Economic Development training program. Nearly one hundred Empowerment Zone residents received formal leadership training. The local Technical Colleges continued to promote basic computer courses and the Middle Georgia Technical College began a Hispanic Academy, designed to facilitate the transition of Hispanic citizens to Georgia communities.

In the areas targeted in the Strategic Plan, the community produced the following accomplishments:

Agriculture

AgAmerica Empowerment Inc. continues to provide a library of conservation tillage equipment for use by area farmers. More than 150 local farmers have participated in the program to place more than 24,000 acres under conservation tillage methods. The organization is also seeking to improve area farms through investment in communications, geographic information systems, and global positioning systems. AgAmerica held a field day on March 19 in cooperation with the Ocmulgee River Soil and Water Conservation District. Over one hundred local farmers attended to view and compare conservation tillage equipment from various vendors and to receive training comparing conservation tillage methods with traditional methods.

Leadership and Volunteerism

The Empowerment Zone provided funding and support for eight Community Leadership programs and a large number of leadership activities during 2003. Nearly 100 adults and youth received formal leadership training. The projects included Leadership Crisp, Leadership Dooly, Caleb Generation Group (youth leadership), Crisp County Youth Council, Dooly County Youth Council and a regional leadership class.

Education

The Cisco Networking Academy in Dooly County, GA, which is operated by LEARNetwork, Inc., started its first classes during the week of August 18, 2003 in the Business Development Center, serving eleven students. This program teaches students how to design, build and maintain computer networks. The Southwest Georgia United Empowerment Zone provides funding for this program partially through a grant from U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.

Project EXCEL (EXcellence in Childcare and Early Learning) began on May 25. The program serves children up to age three and their parents. Program staff members provide continuing training for parents and unlicensed childcare providers, using the nationally recognized Parents As Teachers curriculum. Crisp County Community Council operates the program in cooperation with local churches, DFACS, and other local childcare agencies.

The Crisp County Extension Service, in cooperation with the University of Georgia College of Family and Consumer Science, established a local Consumer Financial Literacy Program in August. The program will provide training for Empowerment Zone adults and youth in credit management, banking, tax preparation and other financial matters.

Unadilla Elementary School was removed from the State of Georgia's "Needs Improvement" list after its students' scores increased by 10% in all subject areas and at all instructional levels. The Business Education Department at Dooly County High School received Industry Certification from the Society for Human Resource Management. This is an honor for the High School and the Dooly County Community. The Dooly County High School continues to offer a second year of Advanced Placement courses on-line. The project uses funds from the Federal Advanced Placement Initiative. This year, the program expanded to include thirty students and three on-site Advanced Placement courses.

The Dooly County High School Future Business Leaders of America (FBLA) broke ground for a school store in February of 2003. Students in the high school construction class will build the store. Members of the FBLA will operate it and gain experience in business operations and retail sales. The construction was complete prior to the end of 2003.

The Crisp County school system continued to operate an after school program funded by the 21st Century Learning Center grant. The program serves more than 400 students in grades one through eight.

Recreation and Culture

Crisp Area Arts Alliance provided four public programs, two programs in schools, and Grass Roots Grants to support arts projects of the Vienna Women's Club and Easter Seals of Southern Georgia. The Georgia Recreation and Parks Association named the Dooly County Recreation Department the Small Agency of the Year for District Three. The Pre-

K Building at the former Vienna Elementary School site is a Rosenwald school historic property. The Vienna Historic Society began an effort to have the site listed on the National Register of Historic Places. The City of Cordele let bids for construction of two new parks in the downtown.

Tourism

The SAM shortline tourist excursion train from Cordele to Americus/Archery was dedicated on February 28. Ridership on the train exceeded all expectations, and the route has received revenues significantly beyond initial projections. The Cordele-Crisp Chamber of Commerce supported tourism through its Watermelon Festival, which won two awards from the Georgia Festival and Events Association. Other Crisp County Tourist events included a duathlon, a triathlon, and a sailplane gathering.

The Dooly County Chamber of Commerce Big Pig Jig festival was named one of the top-ten barbeque contests in the nation by the Travel Channel. The Unadilla Flag project, which placed four large U.S. flags close to the town's primary Interstate exit, was dedicated on June 14. The project will call attention to the Unadilla exits and encourage more travelers and tourists to stop in Unadilla.

Business and Economic Development

The Empowerment Zone, with USDA's approval, added a 328-acre developable site, the Fairway Business Park, located in an industrial area south of Crisp County High School in Cordele. Bringing this area into the Empowerment Zone will increase economic development and employment inside the park.

According to the Georgia Department of Labor, the jobless rate fell in the Empowerment Zone during 2003. MBM Industries began business in Cordele during the fourth quarter of 2003, creating 70 jobs. Heartland Business Systems and Southeastern Forest Products began operations and employed a total of 50 people. These businesses came to Cordele due to the efforts of the Industrial Development Authority and the Cordele-Crisp Industrial Development Council.

The IDC and the IDA received a \$500,000 grant from the OneGeorgia Authority for construction of a 100,000 square foot speculative building in the Cedar Creek Corporate Park. The previous speculative building was placed in use as a result of the successful recruitment activities.

The Business Development Center was 65% occupied by the end of the year. Firms located in the Center employed 18 persons. Events held in the Center included a job fair, entrepreneurial training sessions, and dozens of meetings by various community groups. The Empowerment Zone Board approved the addition of a Business Development Associate position to assist the Business Development Center Manager.

Housing

Crisp Area Habitat for Humanity completed two houses in the McLeod subdivision, one in spring and one in fall. The Habitat Thrift Store opened in May. All proceeds from operations go to the Crisp Area Habitat Chapter to help in building affordable housing.

The Empowerment Pathways YouthBuild program began its first session in December 2003 with 27 students. Participants in the YouthBuild program must typically be very low-income high school dropouts between the ages of 16-24. The participants learn construction skills and have the opportunity to obtain their GED. Houses constructed by YouthBuild participants support the Empowerment Zone=s program to increase decent affordable housing in the community. YouthBuild is partially supported by a grant from the Department of Housing and Urban Development.

The Empowerment Zone hired three new staff members to operate the Youthbuild program and its housing program and created Communities Empowering People Together (CEPT) as a housing subsidiary. In addition to beginning the Youthbuild program, staff members held a Housing Fair in Cordele in June. This event generated over fifty applications for assistance from USDA housing programs.

A developer received a Low Income Housing Tax Credit allocation of more than \$1 million to assist in the creation of affordable housing in the community.

Childcare

The Gillespie Selden Daycare Center received a \$10,000 award from the Georgia Department of Human Resources to provide before- and after-school care for children ages five to thirteen. The funding will allow the Center to expand its existing pre-school and after-school programs.

Transportation

Dooly Crisp Unified Transit Services (DCUTS) provided over 22,000 rides to Empowerment Zone residents during the year. The Motorvater Program, a joint effort between DCUTS and Crisp and Dooly County Department of Family and Children Services (DFACS), opened in March of 2003. This project provides transportation for DFACS clients who are leaving the Temporary Aid for Needy Families program and seeking work. This prevents job loss due to lack of transportation. The program can serve 20 people for three-month intervals each.

Government/Community Cooperation

In the year 2003, the City of Vienna was designated as a Better Hometown community. The City received a "Cities of Excellence" award and a "Tree City USA" award. Vienna Better Hometown (VBH) has generated nearly \$200,000 in downtown investment for the City of Vienna.

The City of Vienna established a Historic Preservation Commission in support of the city's historical, cultural and aesthetic heritage. The Commission was established to stimulate revitalization of the business districts and historic neighborhoods and to protect and enhance local historical and aesthetic attractions to tourists, thereby promoting and stimulating business.

The City of Unadilla, under City Manager Charles Walker and Downtown Coordinator Greg Speight, began plans to increase economic development in the city and revitalize the downtown area. A successful application for Empowerment Zone funds provided a portion of the necessary resources to begin the process.

Effective April 1, Pinehurst's Insurance Services Office rating improved from a class 7 to a class 5. Effective in August, Unadilla's fire insurance rating also improved to class 5. This improvement caused a reduction in insurance premiums for all homeowners and business people within a five-mile radius of the two towns. The Class 5 is the best rating in Dooly County at the present time.

The Crisp County Sheriff Department received funds from the Georgia Emergency Management Agency to participate in a compatible communications system among area public safety agencies and to upgrade the Bomb Squad, which is operated jointly with the Albany Police Department. Crisp County also plans to construct a 480-foot radio tower to improve area communications. The cost of the construction is estimated to be between \$150,000 and \$180,000.

Medical and Social

Opportunities In May of 2003, Big Brothers Big Sisters of South Georgia was recognized for its outstanding growth in serving a record number of 547 children. (BM#23 Task M)

Dooly County Department of Family and Children Services (DFACS) provided tax assistance services to elderly and low-income residents of Dooly County in 2003. The project served twenty-seven families and individuals during the 2003 tax season.

The Flint River Area Barrier Busters received funding from the Empowerment Zone to establish their organization and provide a program of outreach and support for disabled citizens in the Empowerment Zone and surrounding areas and to work toward improved physical accessibility for all citizens.

Level of Community Participation:

The EZ held twenty-five (25) community meetings during the year. There were approximately 580 community members who attended at least one of these meetings. These meetings included the Annual Corporation Meeting, monthly Board of Directors meetings, Executive Committee meetings, Proposal Review Committees, training sessions and workshops, and community meetings held as public forums to discuss Empowerment Zone benchmarks, funding, and future plans.

Cordele Main Street program, in cooperation with Cordele Crisp Industrial Development Council, began a visioning process for the renovation of downtown Cordele, with over fifty people present at visioning and finance meetings. The volunteer efforts of the City of Vienna's Better Hometown group led to the City receiving its Better Hometown designation during the year.

The Crisp County Commission voted to participate in forming a new Resource Conservation and Development Council (RCDC), funded by USDA. The new council will provide services to a nine-county area. The Council will address issues dealing with land, air, water, and other natural resources.

Dooly Dove Days was held on Saturday, September 6, 2003. The event, held on the first day of dove season, provides an opportunity for local residents to meet and talk with local, state, and federal elected officials and government employees. Between 100 and 200 people attended. Governor Sonny Purdue, Representative Jim Marshall of Georgia and Representative Allen Boyd from North Florida and Stone Workman, the Georgia state director for USDA, were present along with State senators, other representatives, federal and state officials, local county commissioners, city council members, mayors, sheriffs and other elected and appointed officials.

USDA/Rural Development in partnership with the Southwest Georgia United Empowerment Zone conducted a Community Training Session on December 3, 2003 at the Cordele Lions Club from 9:00 a.m. until 2:00 p.m. The meeting provided training on all of the USDA grant programs and the environmental clearance process. Approximately 50 businesses and nonprofit organizations attended.

Partnerships and Alliances:

The extensive network of existing partnerships within the Empowerment Zone among businesses, schools, government, churches, and nonprofit agencies remained in place and grew stronger during 2003. Both Crisp and Dooly County developed and improved their regional alliances.

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Dooly County joined a group of six other counties to successfully create a regional Enhanced 911 emergency system (E-911). This is the largest group of counties working cooperatively on the E-911 system statewide.

Problems and Solutions:

The organizations and businesses in the community were strongly and negatively affected by the poor national economic conditions during 2003.

Fedders Unitary Products, formerly Sun Manufacturing, Inc., closed its service center in Vienna with an estimated loss of 85 jobs. The Tyson Foods, Inc. processing plant in Vienna terminated 85 employees as of the first week in November. Crisp County School System lost \$550,000 from State funds in its fiscal year 2002-2003 budget. The 2003-2004 budget reflected a loss of \$1.2 million in state funds. Both LEARNetwork and the Dooly Crisp Unified Transit Services (DCUTS) received Empowerment Zone bridge funds to sustain present operations due to state budget cuts and lack of federal funding.

Because of the strong recruitment efforts by Crisp County Industrial Development Council, the total number of jobs has remained nearly stable. Job growth in Crisp County has to some extent counterbalanced the jobs lost in Dooly County. The Empowerment Zone was able to cushion the shock to the smaller nonprofits. The school system is seeking additional ways to reduce expenses. The budget reductions caused the school system to reduce teaching staff, social workers, and librarians to compensate.

Best Practices:

According to Dr. Rick Wetherill, national head of the rural Empowerment Zone program, the Southwest Georgia United Empowerment Zone can serve as a national model for other rural Empowerment Zone programs. The USDA used the Empowerment Zone staff and community to provide technical assistance to a neighboring community.

The strength of the Southwest Georgia model lies in the large number of organizations and individuals independently working toward positive change and development in the community and the local economy. Many of these entities are represented on the Empowerment Zone Board, and this makes the Empowerment Zone Corporation responsive to community concerns and needs. The Board has continually remained involved to insure that all accountability requirements were met and that all funding benefited the community as a whole.

Other strengths of the Southwest Georgia model include continual leadership development for community members, innovative programs (such as AgAmerica Empowerment and Dooly-Crisp Unified Transportation System (DCUTS)), and continual training and improvement for staff and Board members.

Future Plans:

The Dooly County Commission is sponsoring the development of the Turkey Creek reservoir project, as developed by the National Resources Conservation Service through the Ocmulgee Soil and Water Conservation District. The Turkey Creek Reservoir (Lake Dooly) would be a 1,900 acre lake encompassing portions of Turkey and Pennahatchee creeks. Completion of the project will improve quality of life in Dooly County by improving water conservation and water quality, improve fire protection, improve downstream flood protection, support wildlife habitats, provide opportunities for recreation and housing, and reduce the need for deep irrigation wells. The project is expected to take between five and ten years to complete.

The City of Vienna plans to develop a recreational/educational area on Pennahatchee Creek. The development will preserve green space, provide recreational opportunities, and provide an area for presentation of an environmental education program. Planning for the effort, including public hearings and citizen outreach efforts, began in 2003.

During 2004, the Empowerment Zone plans to work to establish a Community Development Financial Institution to support businesses and redevelopment projects in Crisp and Dooly Counties. The Empowerment Zone's housing program will produce three housing units and continue to work for large-scale housing redevelopment in both counties. The Empowerment Zone will continue to work with new and expanding businesses and will have an additional tenant in the Business Development Center during 2004. The Empowerment Zone staff will continue to seek federal, state, local, and private funding opportunities to support the community's Strategic Plan.