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Regional Approach is a Vital Tool for Rural Counties

Challenges such as aging populations, declines in employment and residents who leave the community for work are shared by many rural communities. However, these challenges don't have to be road blocks if rural areas band together to pool their resources and positive attributes that can attract and retain business.

Recognizing the benefits of working together, a group of interested citizens from a four-county region began meeting about a year ago to share ideas and discuss a regional economic development effort. Those counties, Greene, Jersey, Macoupin and Montgomery, enlisted the aid of the Illinois Institute of Rural Affairs (IIRA) MAPPING the Future of Your Community group to identify challenges and opportunities, and to help create a structure that will enable the four counties to create one vision to benefit them all.

A number of meetings have been held in all four counties over the past few months to gain ideas and input from not only the steering committee, but the public as well. To get the four counties thinking about their strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and challenges, IIRA compiled some trends occurring in the four county-region.

Some of those regional trends identified by IIRA include:

- An aging population and declines in the youth cohort
- Increasing education level, but post-secondary education is still below non-metro and state levels
- Declining workforce employment in the agriculture-related sector and increasing employment in services, finance, insurance and real estate sectors
- Increasing commuting patterns by the workforce
- A weak retail sector
- Microenterprises (businesses with four or fewer employees) represent a substantial source of employment
- An overall decline in employment by industries in the region, but growth in the construction and natural resources & mining sectors.

Further, the four-county region would comprise 169,000 people and stretch from Montgomery County in the East to Greene County in the West and would include every

form of transportation, including major highways, two airports and the Illinois and Mississippi Rivers.

“While I think each county individually had likely already identified some of these trends, I believe having IIRA present them on a regional level helped the groups meeting to brainstorm ideas and solutions be more open to thinking as a larger region instead of just thinking of their individual communities,” said Lea Hudson, Macoupin County steering committee member.

The public will continue to be informed of the results of the various meetings in the region in future articles as the information becomes available.

Anyone with questions about the MAPPING project can contact MAPPING Coordinator Shari Albrecht at 217-825-3812 or Shari.Albrecht@illinois.gov.