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Regional Economic Development Group Meetings Lead to Common Goals

Common trends identified in the four counties of Greene, Jersey, Macoupin and Montgomery by the Illinois Institute of Rural Affairs (IIRA) MAPPING the Future of Your Community group have pointed those involved to some common conclusions and goals for regional economic development.

Greene, Jersey, Macoupin and Montgomery counties have been working with IIRA to identify challenges and opportunities, and to create a structure that will help the counties benefit from the regional approach of economic development. The four-county region is comprised of 169,000 people and stretches 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.

As recently reported, the results of a first series of meetings throughout the region identified that the counties are each facing some of the same challenges, and also pointed to some areas that could lead to business growth through cooperation.

Some conclusions that resulted from initial brainstorming sessions included:

- create a concise, regional marketing plan by 2010;
- capitalize on the fact that the region has a higher percentage of self-employed people than the national average;
- gain a better understanding of available employment opportunities versus the workforce's skill/education level to provide insight into the types of businesses suited to the region;
- encourage local industries to increase their purchases of supplies/materials from other local businesses.

Strengths that were identified included: a good quality of life, strong workforce, reasonable employment costs, plentiful natural resources, tourism and recreation assets, a central location and a strong entrepreneurial spirit.

On the other hand, some limitations were also identified. These included: territorialism by communities, population decline, lack of business incentives, lack of employment opportunities, aging infrastructure, such as water, sewer and roads.

After analyzing the information provided by the small brainstorming groups, IIRA presented five goals. Those goals are:

1. By 2020, the region sees a 15% increase in the number of high-paying jobs, as well as the number of businesses.
2. The region is known throughout the state and Midwest as a great place to live, work and visit. By 2010, the region has a clear, concise regional marketing plan.
3. The region sees the completion of the Delhi-Staunton Corridor and 67 by 2010. It also develops a general infrastructure plan that is followed and understood by towns and cities.
4. By 2020, the Four County Region will see an increase in leadership involvement in various programs and initiatives.
5. By 2020, the percentage of people in the region with at least a high school diploma and some training will increase 15%.

“Now that we have clearly stated our initial goals for the region we must, as a group, determine what type of organizational structure will allow us to begin achieving these goals. The next step for the group is to decide on that structure so we can begin moving forward,” said Cynthia Lamar, steering committee member from Macoupin County.

Questions about the MAPPING project can be directed to MAPPING Coordinator Shari Albrecht at 217-825-3812 or Shari.Albrecht@illinois.gov.