

Action

PUBLIC ISSUE INFORMATION FOR ALABAMA CITIZENS

FROM THE EDITOR

Rural Alabama Initiative

Seeking grant money can be time-consuming and often frustrating. One of the first questions individuals working for organizations involved in community and economic development are asked is "do you provide grant monies?" That has definitely been true for those of us within the Alabama Cooperative Extension System and Auburn University, and, until recently, the answer had almost always been "no." Now, because of the newly developed **Rural Alabama Initiative**, the answer is now an emphatic "yes."

"Action" is a quarterly publication of the Economic and Community Development Institute (ECDI), a partnership of Extension and Auburn University. The mission of ECDI is to improve the quality of life of all Alabama citizens by promoting continuous improvement of economic and community development policy and practice through communication, education, research, and community assistance. ECDI seeks to play a leading role in revitalizing Alabama communities, especially in the state's rural areas. ECDI intends to strengthen community capacity to engage local challenges, take advantage of opportunities, and build on available assets. "Action" is one tool we use to link AU's and Extension's resources to community groups. This issue represents direct funding links among ECDI and all Alabama communities.

The new grant program, **Rural Alabama Initiative**, funded by the Alabama Cooperative Extension System through the Economic and Community Development Institute is the focus of this spring 2007 issue of "Action." Joe Sumners, ECDI director, is the coordinator for this issue.

The next issue of "Action," summer 2007, will highlight alternative energy sources. For more information on these topics or suggestions for additional topics, contact the editor at (334) 844-3517, fax (334) 844-9022, or e-mail chesnjt@auburn.edu.

J. Thomas Chesnutt
Editor

Extension Tourism Specialist

Rural Alabama Initiative

As director of the Economic and Community Development Institute (ECDI), I am committed to promoting economic prosperity and an improved quality of life for Alabama's rural communities. For several years, I have listened to citizens and experts, conducted research and spent time thinking about what we should be doing to improve conditions in our rural communities. Many of my ideas are found in these ECDI publications: "Beyond the Interstate: The Crisis in Rural Alabama," "Crossroads and Connections: Strategies for Rural Alabama" and "Listening to Rural Alabama: A Report on Alabama Rural Prosperity Forums." These reports are available on the ECDI Web site, (www.auburn.edu/edi). In addition, the Southern Growth Policies Board offers excellent recommendations in "The New Architecture of Rural Prosperity: 2005 Report on the Future of the South" (www.southern.org/pubs/architecture-report2005/finalreport.pdf).

Alabama Rural Roundtable

To solicit the ideas of Alabama's rural leaders, ECDI sponsored a statewide forum on rural development on June 16, 2006 at Auburn University. The Alabama Rural Roundtable brought together 55 key state decision-makers and community leaders from throughout Alabama to identify priorities and strategies for promoting prosperity in rural Alabama.

Roundtable participants ranked the following as the top priorities for Alabama's rural prosperity:

1. Leadership and Citizen Participation. Roundtable participants complained of inadequate preparation of new leaders, limited opportunities for citizen engagement, strong resistance to change, a lack of diversity among leaders and few crossroads where community leaders could talk, decide and work together to address local issues.

2. Infrastructure and Communications Technology. In the "knowledge economy," communications technology has become a core infrastructure; yet, many rural areas remain unconnected. Likewise, many rural areas lack the transportation, water, sewer and healthcare infrastructure needed to support economic development.

3. Education and Workforce Development. Rural workers lack many of the skills needed for today's economy. Roundtable participants noted that this problem was related to an inadequate level of communication between the education and business communities.

A report on the Alabama Rural Roundtable, as well as many other rural development resources, can be found at www.auburn.edu/edi/alrural-roundtable.htm.

(Continued on page 4)

Alabama Communities of Excellence (ACE)

EXCELLENT COMMUNITY CHECKLIST

1. LEADERSHIP

Community Leadership

- ☑ The community has many dedicated, diverse, and energetic leaders.
- ☑ The private sector, community and civic organizations, and faith-based organizations are consistently involved in local initiatives and projects.
- ☑ The community has an active civic life with multiple opportunities for citizen involvement e.g., town meetings, deliberative forums, concerts, festivals, community improvement projects).
- ☑ Local government leaders are committed to strengthening community partnerships and engaging citizens, especially for the planning and implementation of economic and community development initiatives.
- ☑ Elected officials maintain good working relations and seek to constructively resolve differences.
- ☑ Local government leaders build bridges and alliances with other jurisdictions and organizations to encourage economic development in the region.
- ☑ City and county governments are committed to the training and professional development of local government officials and staff.

Leadership Development

- ☑ The community/county has a formal, active leadership development program.
- ☑ Local government, the chamber of commerce, the business community, and civic groups actively support the program and encourage employee participation.
- ☑ There are adequate funds and staff to plan and conduct the program.
- ☑ Program participants represent the diversity of the community (racial, gender, geographic, political, economic, etc.).

- ☑ The curriculum includes instruction on basic leadership skills/strategies (e.g., planning, problem-solving, teamwork, interpersonal skills, conflict management, valuing diversity, etc.).
- ☑ The curriculum adequately addresses economic development, community development, and community planning and design topics.
- ☑ The program format is interactive, participatory, and innovative (i.e., not simply lectures and presentations).
- ☑ The program has a youth leadership component.
- ☑ The program provides the opportunity for real-world applications — connecting participants with community improvement plans or projects.

2. PLANNING

Vision and Strategic Planning

- ☑ The community has an up-to-date strategic plan that provides a compelling vision for the future along with specific strategies for realizing that vision.
- ☑ A large, diverse group of leaders and stakeholders participated in the process and support the plan (i.e., planning participants include a broad cross-section of the community).
- ☑ A detailed action plan specifies how the plan's goals and objectives will be implemented in the community (i.e., who will be involved, the time frame for accomplishment, needed resources, key milestones/benchmarks, and the expected results or product); and
- ☑ A mechanism for ongoing review and revision is incorporated into the plan - both to evaluate accomplishment and to correct implementation problems.

Comprehensive Planning

- ☑ The community has an up-to-date comprehensive land use plan that includes policies and strategies for land use, transportation, housing, community facilities, and resource conservation.
- ☑ The community has specific plans for zoning, development regulation,

- and design/appearance review that are actively enforced.
- ☑ All planning initiatives are consistent with community design standards and goals.

3. ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Strategy

- ☑ The community has an up-to-date, comprehensive economic development plan (either separately or as part of the strategic plan). The plan addresses business retention, expansion and recruitment; commercial, retail and small business development; and tourism and retiree attraction.
- ☑ The economic development plan includes an analysis of the local economy -- identifying strengths, potential opportunities, and the types of businesses that best fit the community.
- ☑ Local infrastructure is adequate to support the selected business targets.
- ☑ The community has a quality site that is suitable for desired business targets, free of easements and/or encumbrances, and available at a fair market price.
- ☑ The plan is fully supported by community leaders involved with economic development.

Organization

- ☑ The community (or county) has an economic development or industrial development authority/board/individual responsible for business recruitment.
- ☑ A single point of contact is identified/designated for all economic development activities.
- ☑ The organization has a structured and trained prospect sales team.
- ☑ The staff (or officers) of the development organization regularly participates in state professional association activities.

Information and Marketing

- ☑ The economic development organization maintains current, relevant information about the community and has a quality promotional brochure.

- ☑ Available properties are monitored, listed in the Economic Development Partnership of Alabama (EDPA) database, and updated regularly.
- ☑ The organization/individual effectively markets the community to appropriate businesses targets and maintains regular contact with state officials and other economic development professionals.
- ☑ The community/county hosts a website on the Internet with information appropriate to its targets.

Existing Business Program

- ☑ The community has a formal and ongoing business retention and expansion program that includes:
 - ☑ Regular visits to business owners and managers,
 - ☑ A process for addressing problems identified by industry leaders,
 - ☑ An annual industrial and commercial recognition event,
 - ☑ A survey of labor wages and fringe benefits, and
 - ☑ Workforce education and training programs.

Commercial/Retail Business Development

- ☑ The community has an active Chamber of Commerce or Business Alliance with at least a paid part-time executive.
- ☑ The community maintains a comprehensive inventory of retail, commercial, and service properties, including spaces that formerly housed retail or commercial entities and those with that potential.

4. QUALITY OF LIFE

Education

- ☑ All schools in the community consistently achieve “academically clear” status with student standardized test scores at or above the state average.
- ☑ The schools/school system:
 - ☑ Is Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) accredited,
 - ☑ Offers Career/Technical Education counseling and programs,
 - ☑ Offers enhanced mathematics and science programs,
 - ☑ Coordinates formal parental involvement programs,
 - ☑ Provides Adult Literacy programs, and
 - ☑ Participates in formal partnerships with local businesses.
- ☑ Additional educational enhancements include:
 - ☑ Participation in the Alabama Reading Initiative or a similar program,
 - ☑ Extended-day/out-of-school-time programs,
 - ☑ Leadership training for principals and superintendent,
 - ☑ Pre-kindergarten programs, and
 - ☑ Quality teacher education and professional development opportunities (in addition to the state appropriated professional development days).
 - ☑ Appropriate curriculum for migrant populations (if applicable) includes “English as a Second Language.”

Healthcare Services

- ☑ Primary, dental, and mental health services are available to all age groups.
- ☑ The community has ready access to a hospital that provides an array

of vital services, including emergency transport services and a 24-hour emergency room.

- ☑ The community has access to long-term care (i.e., nursing home/assisted living facility) and home health services.
- ☑ The community promotes wellness and prevention programs (i.e., health education, recreation and physical fitness).
- ☑ The community’s healthcare leadership is committed to planning for future healthcare services and needs (e.g., recruitment and retention of health care providers and professionals, workforce development, and the development of strategies for funding healthy initiatives).
- ☑ Public buildings are designated smoke-free environments.

Amenities and Aesthetics

- ☑ The community supports a variety of amenities that contribute to enhanced quality of life (e.g., arts, entertainment, recreation).
- ☑ Public property and buildings are well maintained.
- ☑ Attractive gateways are maintained at city entrances.
- ☑ The community supports downtown enhancements and preservation of historic buildings.



Action
Alabama
Communities
in Transition

Editor
J. Thomas Chesnutt
Extension Tourism Specialist

**ALABAMA
COOPERATIVE
Extension
SYSTEM**
Your Experts for Life

“Action” is published once each quarter by the Alabama Cooperative Extension System.

We would like you to share success stories in your community for inclusion in future issues of “Action.” Send to: J. Thomas Chesnutt, 218 Extension Hall, Auburn University, Alabama 36849.

(Continued from page 1)

Rural Alabama Initiative Grant Program

As evidenced by the Alabama Rural Roundtable findings and the ECDI publications, there is no shortage of ideas about what we should be doing for rural communities. In fact, leaders in every community already have good ideas for local projects. What they often lack are the financial resources to support the strategies and projects that they have identified.

The Alabama Cooperative Extension System is offering assistance. To provide seed money for some of these worthwhile community initiatives, Extension has created the Rural Alabama Initiative (RAI) grant program, which ECDI administers.

The RAI funds educational initiatives related to community and economic development. Grants of between \$1,000 and \$25,000 were awarded recently to fund worthy local projects in communities

throughout Alabama. While organizations throughout the state were eligible to apply for the grants, the actual grant proposals had to be submitted in partnership with a county Extension coordinator. In accordance with the recommendations from the Alabama Rural Roundtable, ECDI gave priority to educational projects that addressed the issues of leadership development, citizen engagement, stakeholder networking and connections, workforce preparation and development and communications technology. In addition, ECDI favored projects featuring collaborations among organizations and jurisdictions in rural Alabama.

Goal of the Rural Alabama Initiative

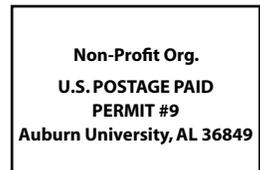
The goal of the Rural Alabama Initiative is to assist communities that seek economic prosperity and a better quality of life. We want more and more excellent communities throughout Alabama. This is also the goal of the

Alabama Communities of Excellence (ACE) program. I have included the ACE "Criteria for Excellent Communities" for your reference. I hope you will use this as a checklist to assess where your community is now and to create benchmarks for community progress.

Joe A. Sumners
Director
Economic and Community
Development Institute



UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE
STATE HEADQUARTERS
AUBURN UNIVERSITY, ALABAMA 36849-5631
OFFICIAL BUSINESS




J. Thomas Chesnutt, *Extension Tourism Specialist*

Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work in agriculture and home economics, Acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, and other related acts, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture. The Alabama Cooperative Extension System (Alabama A&M University and Auburn University) offers educational programs, materials, and equal opportunity employment to all people without regard to race, color, national origin, religion, sex, age, veteran status, or disability.

© 2007 by the Alabama Cooperative Extension System. All rights reserved.