

Listening to Rural Alabama:

A Report on Alabama Rural Prosperity Forums

Prepared Jointly by:

Dr. Robert Mckenzie
Alabama Center for Civic Life
713 Kirkwood Drive
Northport, AL 35473
1-888-593-1228 (Toll Free)

Mr. Ray Minor
Alabama Center for Civic Life
P.O. Box 2859
Birmingham, AL 35202
1-877-201-8787 (Toll Free)

Dr. Joe A. Sumners
Economic Development Institute
Auburn University
3354 Haley Center
Auburn University, AL 36849
1-334-844-4704

June 2005

Executive Summary

The purpose of this collaborative endeavor was to gather insights and *political intelligence* from community forums conducted in Alabama as part of Southern Growth Policies Board and Governor Bob Riley's initiative on rural prosperity. These forums enabled officeholders and the general public to pinpoint how far citizens will go with a proposed course of action to implement one thing held valuable before they will no longer support it in favor of other things held valuable.

For several years, the Southern Growth Policies Board (SGPB) has used community forums as a source for its annual reports. Discussion aids (issue books) were used to encourage careful deliberation about fundamental choices for addressing an issue. The forum dynamic encouraged *citizen-to-citizen* engagement. Through this process, citizens discussed advantages, disadvantages, costs, consequences, and acceptable and unacceptable trade-offs among courses of action stemming from each basic approach.

In the Alabama forums, participants examined three basic approaches for creating rural prosperity: collaborate regionally, embrace change, and level the playing field by providing infrastructure. Approximately 430 citizens participated in 15 forums and several other meetings. The forums represented a cross-section of the State including citizens from *Anniston, Bay Minette, Carrolton, Dothan, Fayette, Gadsden, Montgomery, McIntosh, Opp, Phil Campbell, Robertsdale, Thomasville, and Tuscaloosa*. In addition, SGPB conducted a focus group in *Selma*, and meetings were held in *Thomasville, Marion, and Livingston* dealing with the choices on rural prosperity. Forum participants completed and turned in 205 usable post-forum questionnaires.

Further, Alabama Center for Civic Life's (ACCL) and Economic Development Institute's (EDI) moderators and recorders took notes to capture community concerns and political will that cannot be gleaned from aggregating individual survey responses.

In sum, rural residents who participated in these forums wrestled with how much change they would accept in order to improve their communities economically. Participants were generally willing to cooperate across political jurisdictions and to embrace change if assured that proposed change would be unique to their communities and their rural lifestyles could be maintained. They did not want to lose control of their destinies. Citizens particularly resented outside decisions that change their lives without their participation. They were ambivalent about increased taxes for infrastructure improvements. Participants desired honest, effective leadership and capacity to make decisions on a case-by-case basis. In other words, citizens hoped to preserve their small community identity, fix what ails their communities, control whatever change takes place in their communities, leverage their limited resources, provide for quality of life and decent standard of living, and secure prosperity for future generations.

Introduction

This document is a report on the Alabama rural prosperity forums. It is a descriptive account of deliberative forums held in Alabama in conjunction with the Southern Growth Policies Board's (SGPB) yearly initiative. Annually, SGPB starts a conversation in the South on a particular issue related to economic development. In 2005, Southern Growth explored the issue of rural prosperity in preparation for the ***Summit on the Rural South Conference***. Southern Growth coordinated focus groups and encouraged communities to hold deliberative forums throughout the South to gain input from citizens for the ***2005 Report on the Future of the South***.

In Alabama, the Alabama Center for Civic Life (ACCL) and the Economic Development Institute (EDI) collaborated to arrange forums in the State. Since January 2005, the Alabama Association of Regional Councils of Government with assistance from Alabama Center for Civic Life, Economic Development Institute, Tuscaloosa's Challenge 21 and the Governor's Black Belt Action Commission held forums on rural prosperity across the State of Alabama.

The purpose of this collaborative endeavor was to gather insights and *political intelligence* from community forums conducted in Alabama as part of Southern Growth Policies Board and Governor Bob Riley's initiative on rural prosperity. These forums were held to enable officeholders and the general public to pinpoint how far citizens will go with a proposed course of action to implement one thing held valuable before they will no longer support it in favor of other things held valuable.

During the first quarter of 2005, Southern Growth Policies Board coordinated focus groups and encouraged communities to hold deliberative forums on rural

prosperity throughout the South. Southern Growth framed three basic rural development approaches for discussion at the forums. These approaches were: collaborate regionally, embrace change, and level the playing field by providing infrastructure. Below are “best foot forward” examples of each approach:

1. **Collaborate Regionally:** A community’s economy is not self-contained. Decisions on where businesses invest are increasingly made on a regional-not local-basis. Likewise, workers commute and residents shop throughout an economic region that crosses community boundaries. Few communities can offer everything to everybody. Therefore, the way to create critical mass is through regional collaboration and identity building.
2. **Embrace Change:** Change is constant. Most rural businesses, institutions and development practices were created when farming and factories could be counted on to create prosperity. Thus, the challenge isn’t to stop change but to master it. We need to prepare for new jobs, businesses, neighbors, and ways of life.
3. **Level The Playing Field By Providing Infrastructure.** Investing in the basics (water, sewer, bandwidth and industrial parks or research centers) will level the playing field and give rural communities the means to compete. Rural areas already offer an attractive quality of life, but need modern amenities in order to make them attractive to high growth businesses.

For several years, the Southern Growth Policies Board (SGPB) has used community forums as a source for its annual reports. Discussion aids (issue books) were used to encourage careful deliberation about fundamental choices for addressing

an issue. The forum dynamic encouraged *citizen-to-citizen* engagement. Through this process, citizens discussed advantages, disadvantages, costs, consequences, and acceptable and unacceptable trade-offs among courses of action stemming from each basic approach. In short, rural citizens who participated in these forums wrestled with how much change they would accept in order to improve their communities.

Methodology

Qualitative and quantitative data were used to compile this report. Each forum was lead by a moderator, and a recorder captured participants' responses, both verbal and nonverbal. Pre-forum and post-forum questionnaires were administered at the forums. The two-hour forums were held at 14 different locations during January through May of 2005. Participants examined three basic approaches for creating rural prosperity: collaborate regionally, embrace change, and level the playing field by providing infrastructure. A total of 430 citizens participated in 15 forums and several other meetings. Tuscaloosa had two forums with different demographics. The first one was composed primarily of college and high school students and individuals from across the state. The other one included citizens from the local area. The forums represented a cross-section of the State including citizens from *Anniston, Bay Minette, Carrolton, Dothan, Fayette, Gadsden, Montgomery, McIntosh, Opp, Phil Campbell, Robertsdale, Thomasville, and Tuscaloosa*. In addition, SGPB conducted a focus group in *Selma*, and meetings were held in *Thomasville, Marion, and Livingston* dealing with the choices on rural prosperity. A total of 205 usable post-forum questionnaires were completed and turned in by participants. Alabama Center for Civic Life's (ACCL) and Economic Development Institute's (EDI) moderators and recorders took notes to

capture community concerns and political will that cannot be gleaned from aggregating individual survey responses. SGPB shared its data from the Alabama forums. These data, notes, and observations from ACCL and EDI moderators and recorders form the basis for this separate report on community forums conducted in Alabama.

The dynamics of community forums encourage *citizen-to-citizen* engagement. Through this practice, citizens discuss the advantages, disadvantages, costs, consequences, and acceptable and unacceptable trade-offs among courses of action stemming from each basic approach to a common problem. This process encourages citizens to work through tensions among things held valuable, even to question “best-foot-forward” descriptions of possible approaches. Deliberative forums can help officeholders and the general public gauge how far citizens will go with a desire to improve economically before they will become more concerned about holding on to aspects of traditional community life they hold dear. These kinds of forums produce intelligence that cannot be gleaned from aggregating individual responses as in polls or from questioning individuals in demographic focus groups.

People do not normally exhibit their shared community relationships in focus groups. For example, if a post-forum questionnaire reveals that 97% are “strongly in favor” or “somewhat in favor” of a proposal, deliberative forums help pinpoint what reservations are hidden in the “somewhat favor” position. To interpret the 97% as overwhelming support may miss the reservations that would cause that support to evaporate.

Results

Results from the forums revealed the following:

- 1. Citizens welcomed the opportunity to engage one another and have their voices heard in community forums.**

Those attending these community forums universally found this type of citizen-to-citizen discussion to be a valuable experience. Unfortunately, they also said that such forums are far too rare an occurrence in their communities. Many participants agreed that conducting regular forums was a good idea. With few exceptions, most of the participants were professionals. They noted the need to extend these sorts of forums out to broader participation. For example, rural residents outside Anniston expressed gratitude for the opportunity to share with one another their concerns and dreams. In McIntosh, a participant said, “***This is the best county meeting I have ever been to.***” In Dothan, participants left agreeing that regular forums on rural issues would be very useful. In Tuscaloosa, a participant reflected a common sentiment stating, “***People in the community want to make their own decisions. We need more town meetings to discuss problems and opportunities.***” The Montgomery forum included people from around the state. They left with interest in sponsoring such forums in their own communities.

More pointedly, citizens in most communities emphasized that decisions about them needed to be made by them, not by outsiders. Decisions made by outside corporations or state or federal officials intrude

upon the local citizens' sense of responsibility. These citizens said too often they did not know about decisions affecting their communities until those decisions were being implemented. In one community, this attitude was so prevalent that forum participants said, ***“Most citizens in our community feel they have absolutely no say in community affairs.”*** The forums revealed that rural residents value highly their personal freedom to use their energy, time, and property as they see fit. Unfortunately, a common observation in many of the forums was that the community no longer had the community spirit it once had. In Thomasville, a participant's question, ***“How do we go from apathy to action?”***, captured citizens' desire to work together to solve their own problems.

The responses to post-forum questionnaires provide some potential answers for action. They reflect what has been learned from nearly 25 years of study on participation in deliberative decision-making by the Kettering Foundation, drawing on the work of entities such as ACCL, EDI and SGPB. Some 51% of those responding answered “yes” to the question, “are you thinking differently about this issue now that you have participated in the forum?” and 65% of those responding answered “yes” to the question “do you see ways for people to work on this issue that you didn't see before?” National research on the effects of deliberative forums parallels these results. Participants in forums may not change their personal views significantly. What does change more is their perception of

why others have their views, opening more possibilities for citizens to work together even if they do not agree fully on all matters.

This indication (for citizens to work together) from the forums is important to the observation of many that community effectiveness had declined and more community involvement is needed. As the Kettering Foundation has been learning from communities around the nation, deliberative forums have potential to build citizen engagement and more productive working relationships among them to create political will.

- 2. Forum participants saw value in all three approaches (collaborate regionally, embrace change, and level the playing field) and viewed them as interrelated and sequential, rather than in direct conflict with one another.**

Specifically, forum participants tended to see generating regional cooperation as an initial phase, building greater desire for change as a second phase, and increasing infrastructure as a third phase based on needs identified in the first two phases. Some saw building greater desire for change as the initial step, without which generating regional cooperation would be difficult.

- 3. Citizens addressed concerns very practically as applied specifically to their communities. They talked about the approaches in general across a range of matters but with specific application to their local environment.**

For example, citizens in Phil Campbell and Calhoun County addressed changes taking place with the influx of Hispanic workers and their families. In Baldwin and Pickens Counties, forum participants wrestled with tensions between desire for economic growth and the desire to maintain small town familiarity and resist outside corporate control of local economy. In Etowah and Covington Counties, participants fretted about lack of knowledge of governmental and economic decisions until they were implemented. In Washington County, participants addressed the need for regional cooperation on specific needs. In Fayette County, participants addressed the need for clean, reliable drinking water and the pros and cons of becoming more connected with Tuscaloosa. In Houston County, participants discussed developing local entrepreneurs rather than relying on outside industries. In Thomasville, participants probed what exactly is the meaning of collaboration in specific cases. In Opp, citizens wrestled with what would encourage the provision of more money for needed improvements.

- 4. Forum participants favored regional approaches and strategies for economic development that may transcend political boundaries and were aware of tradeoffs. Additionally, they favored case-by-case judgments and careful consideration of long-range consequences. They also favored cooperation over consolidation.**

While 96% of those answering the post-forum questionnaire agreed with the statement: "Rural communities should band with their neighbors

to develop a regional identity, Even IF it means losing some of their individual identity, ” 97% of those answering the post-forum questionnaire agreed with the following action: “Coordinate or consolidate services between neighboring communities to achieve economies of scale.” However, forum participants recognized that tradeoffs exist. They preferred regional cooperation strategies that protected individual community identities, especially when such cooperation might aim at consolidation of jurisdictions. They gave higher value to cooperation than consideration and were often particularly worried about losing community identity when schools were closed or outside corporations became dominant in their economy.

A participant in the Montgomery forum captured a general feeling for most: “***We need to develop ways to share resources, money, and ideas. Collaborative work between communities/regions offers potential for greater returns than a community can achieve on its own.***” Forum participants noted that regional approaches and strategies for economic development are site specific. Whether or not to cooperate regionally depends upon a given project and possible participants. Only 45% of those favoring regional identity “somewhat agreed,” indicating reservations on particulars and 33% of those favoring economies of scale “somewhat agreed.” For example, in Baldwin County, participants noted that regional cooperation was held valuable by the Chamber of Commerce but was not embraced as a countywide concept or across county lines.

They also noted that municipalities considered zoning up to the edge of developments but would not include them as voters who could shift political power. Likewise, in Pickens County, participants noted the value of regional cooperation in healthcare and influence on government but also noted that those who tended to have resources to lead change liked rural lifestyles and were reluctant to seek dramatic growth. On the other hand, in Etowah County, participants did **“not like the idea of local, state, or federal politicians dictating what kind of actions are taken in their rural communities.”** In Washington County, participants agreed that a regional plan for economic development was needed to attract new industry, but they also noted that changes would take a generation and **“community buy-in must be long-term.”** Participants in Fayette County noted many instances of successful cooperation in healthcare, education, and economic development extending beyond their own town and county. They advocated regional cooperation to secure a north-south highway. They also spoke repeatedly of voluntarily living in Fayette County because of low crime and high community care that existed there.

In Tuscaloosa, participants wrestled with how much responsibility to take for smaller communities surrounding the county seat. They had reservations about the value of school consolidations. They generally felt that Mercedes-Benz was positive for the area, but they noted that a few people in the Brookwood/Vance area worked for Mercedes and that housing prices had become less affordable for local residents. They noted

that the key to successful collaboration was to think through thoroughly from the beginning the possible impacts of changes. In Houston County, participants felt that losing some identity in order to be more successful was acceptable but that major communities and institutions such as schools and a strong downtown area should be maintained. They put it this way, “***hold on to the things that are unique to the community or place and seek to identify and exploit economic development riches.***”

- 5. Citizens recognized that they must begin to think beyond the farm and factory and make changes to accommodate the new knowledge economy. They saw educational improvement and development of community spirit and leadership as critical.**

Some 87% of those answering the post-forum questionnaire agreed with the statement: “Rural communities should reinvent themselves, Even IF it means letting go of some of the things that helped build the community.” Again, forum participants understood that there are trade-offs with this choice. Citizens put embracing change in the context of how to do it without losing certain things held valuable, such as peace and quiet, autonomy, and community traditions. As a Houston County citizen put it, “***Rural communities must identify and retain their unique features. They have to find their niches.***” The young people in a Tuscaloosa forum (which included college students from around the state and high school students from Fayette) did not automatically reject tradition. They felt that local community characteristics were an important part of their

heritage, but were vocal in rejecting racism as having any current or future part in that heritage.

Citizens are aware of the changing demographics of the State, especially the growing Hispanic population. Although 84% of those answering the post-forum questionnaire agreed with the following action: “Make special efforts to engage immigrants in business and community life”, the shift from ‘strongly agree’ (38%) to ‘somewhat agree’ (46%) was noticeable.

Participants in the Phil Campbell forum noted that citizens must think ahead about the impact of new immigrants entering local labor markets. The decision to embrace change, or not, is a matter of mindset. Most forum participants had already made this decision. But, importantly, discussion of the choice allowed citizens to wrestled with their inner and outer tensions about what and how much they valued in an existing way of life compared to change accompanying greater economic development.

6. Forum participants felt that rural needs take a backseat to their urban neighbors. They felt that they could not compete with large urban centers.

An overwhelming majority (86%) of those answering the post-forum questionnaire agreed with the statement: “Rural communities should make investments in modern infrastructure Even IF it means raising taxes.” The approach of investing in rural infrastructure probably created the greatest tension within the three approaches. Despite the strong support for

increased investment evidenced in the post-forum questionnaires, Alabama voters regularly vote down tax increases. Forum participants noted that people are wary of raising taxes because they do not trust that the funds will be honestly accounted for and will not be used to meet clearly defined community needs. As a Dothan citizen put it, “***The answer to raising taxes to pay for infrastructure is Hell No!***” Forum participants noted that this approach is site specific. Whether or not to give priority to developing infrastructure depends on the needs in a given community and what sort of infrastructure is being targeted. Many rural communities have poor tax bases and need outside assistance.

7. Citizens favored increased spending to address rural concerns, especially infrastructure needs, though they noted that increased funds are difficult to obtain unless responsibility for their expenditure can be clearly fixed and monitored.

There remains strong support for traditional economic development approaches. This is reflected by the 69% of those answering the post-forum questionnaire that agreed with the following action: “Focus the majority of our resources on industrial recruitment.” However, only 45% “somewhat agreed” as compared with 24% who “strongly agreed.” In Baldwin County, participants discussed in some detail the need to protect and encourage local businesses rather than be dominated by larger outside owned entities. Participants also noted these concerns in Pickens, Calhoun, Fayette, Houston, and Tuscaloosa Counties. Ninety-four percent

(94%) of those answering the post-forum questionnaire agreed that we should “**Focus the majority of our resources on creating and growing our own businesses.**” Of the 94%, 50% “strongly agreed” and 44% “somewhat agreed” that the focus should be on creating and growing their own businesses (again indicating further thoughts that need exploration). The kind of jobs developed locally is a probable variable. For example, participants in Tuscaloosa County noted that service jobs built on tourism often did not pay enough to support a family. The large number of “somewhat support” responses to both questions of an “either-or” character suggests an unresolved tension between devoting resources to outside recruitment or internal development/support or some willingness to split the difference in effort depending on circumstances. The strong desire to maintain control over local decisions among forum participants suggests that (maintaining local control) as a key variable. Discussions within the forums revealed support for a wide range of approaches. In addition to recruiting new businesses into a community, economic development should involve community leadership and planning, business retention and expansion, commercial development, healthcare, education, downtown revitalization, arts, culture, and heritage, and other quality of life factors. A citizen in Anniston put it this way, “**We are going to have to look for alternatives to smokestack chasing and get away from the buffalo hunt mentality.**” Improving education for workforce development was a concern in most forums. Many noted that effective and honest

leadership was a major component of needed infrastructure. The subjects of casinos and lotteries came up only once in the context of lack of public acceptance of them as revenue sources.

- 8. Forum participants saw community economic development as much more than industrial recruitment. In their view, economic development should involve multiple community agencies, actors, and activities.**
- 9. Citizens were generally optimistic about their communities and confident in their abilities to face the challenges ahead.** This optimism, which can only be ascertained from listening to people interact with fellow residents – not from polling data, was an impression discerned by the recorders.

In addition to the nine results listed, forum participants identified a number of *concerns* common to development challenges in rural communities. Among the things that concerned forum participants included:

- The exodus of young people
- Lack of citizen involvement
- Quality of rural public schools
- Loss of manufacturing jobs (particularly in the textile and apparel sector)
- Workforce development issues (including updating workers' skills and work ethic)
- Failure to keep up with the spread of technology and telecommunications
- Declining downtown areas (empty buildings)

- Rural access to healthcare
- Lack of public transportation to get to jobs and other services
- Inadequate water and sewer infrastructure
- Drug abuse (especially the spread of met amphetamines)
- Challenges in improving race relations, in some areas now including a growing Hispanic population, and
- Alabama's constitution and tax structure, which hamper ability to move successfully into the future.

Furthermore, citizens offered specific *recommendations* for bringing prosperity to their communities. Possibilities for rural prosperity included:

- Improving the quantity and quality of local leadership
- Providing increased opportunities for citizen engagement (e.g., forums, town meetings)
- Supporting regional collaborative approaches to economic development
- Improving technology access in rural areas (extend broadband)
- Improving the quality of and secure funding for rural schools
- Updating workers' skills and capacities, and
- Providing increased support for entrepreneurs, small businesses, and quality of life enhancements.

Conclusion

In sum, rural residents who participated in these forums wrestled with how much change they would accept in order to improve their communities economically. Participants were generally willing to cooperate across political jurisdictions and to

embrace change if assured that proposed change would be unique to their communities and their rural lifestyles could be maintained. They did not want to lose control of their destinies. Citizens particularly resented outside decisions that change their lives without their participation. They were ambivalent about increased taxes for infrastructure improvements. Participants desired honest, effective leadership and capacity to make decisions on a case-by-case basis. In other words, citizens hoped to preserve their small community identity, fix what ails their communities, control whatever change takes place in their communities, leverage their limited resources, provide for quality of life and decent standard of living, and secure prosperity for future generations.

Alabama Center for Civic Life (ACCL) is a nonprofit, non-partisan organization established to study and build civic infrastructure and habits of deliberative decision-making among citizens in Alabama. ACCL worked closely with the Governor's Black Belt Action Commission, the Alabama Association of Regional Councils of Government, Tuscaloosa's Challenge 21, the University of Alabama School of Medicine College of Community Health Sciences, Pickens County Cooperative Extension Service, the University of South Alabama, and Baldwin County Public School Board in developing forums and listening to citizens. For more information, call 1-877-201-8787 or 1-888-593-1228.

Economic Development Institute (EDI) is Auburn University's outreach unit for community and economic development. Created in 1988, EDI is one of Alabama's leading organizations for economic development education and professional development, research and community assistance. For more information, call 1-334-844-4704.