

## 2001 Annual Report Executive Summary

### Southernmost Illinois Delta Empowerment Zone

Communities, individuals and organizations in the Southernmost Illinois Delta Empowerment Zone worked hard during 2001 and had much to show for their efforts. Ninety individual projects were completed in the zone. Each of the three subzones--Alexander County, Pulaski County and Johnson County--can point with pride to improvements large and small made with empowerment zone assistance. From a historic courthouse, now accessible to all Pulaski County citizens, to new books in a small school library in Johnson County and a new roof on a neglected community center in Alexander County, it's obvious that communities are rolling up their sleeves and getting things done.

More people participated in empowerment zone public meetings during 2001. Two hundred citizens attended the annual public input meeting in July, twice as many as during 2000. Attendance was also up at the 21 subzone meetings held throughout the year. Clearly, more residents of the Southernmost Illinois Delta Empowerment Zone have decided that involvement in the empowerment zone initiative is worthwhile.

Each of the ninety completed projects receiving SIDEZ assistance were included in the 10-year strategic plan that focuses on seven major goal areas: Infrastructure, Economic Development, Tourism Development, Life-Long Learning and Education, Stronger Unity/Sense of Community, Health Care and Housing. The following offers a sample of work accomplished during the year in each goal area.

**Infrastructure Accomplishments:** Infrastructure improvements included upgrades to roads, fire stations and ambulance service. Over 23 miles of gravel roads were upgraded to oil and chip and several miles of municipal roads were paved. A sewer feasibility study was completed for the unincorporated community of Perks.

**Economic Development Accomplishments:** SIDEZ pursued a comprehensive approach to economic development that included training new entrepreneurs, providing low cost financing and free credit counseling for businesses, marketing the zone and developing industrial sites for future growth. SIDEZ established two new loan programs during 2001. These included a micro-enterprise and youth loan revolving loan fund and an agricultural diversification loan fund. The zone also started making loans from its Intermediary Relending Program loan fund established in late 2000. Six businesses borrowed \$287,300 during 2001, creating eleven full time jobs. Forty-four entrepreneurs participated in three business start-up classes sponsored by SIDEZ in partnership with Shawnee Community College and University of Illinois Extension. Grape growers from the region began developing the organizational structure for a winery cooperative. SIDEZ also assisted thirteen low-income working families in purchasing a car to drive to work by providing low-interest financing.

**Tourism Development Accomplishments:** SIDEZ conducted an aggressive tourism marketing campaign during 2001 in partnership with the Southernmost Illinois Tourism Bureau. Over 4,000 persons requested information from the tourism bureau about SIDEZ from magazine advertisements. The advertisements and a new tourism brochure were funded by the empowerment zone and an Illinois Bureau of Tourism Partnership Marketing grant. Proceeds from the grant were also used to update and re-design the tourism bureau's website. Other tourism marketing efforts included the lease of five billboards along I-57 in Missouri and a new tourism brochure for Alexander County. Feature articles on bicycling in Johnson County were widely published. Communities also improved their tourist infrastructure. Pulaski County completed an access road and boat ramp on the Ohio River and Alexander County erected new interpretive signs. Two new events were held in Johnson County--a family

Olympics and a story-telling festival--that attracted hundreds of empowerment zone residents as well as some out-of-state visitors.

**Life-Long Learning and Education Accomplishments:** All seven school districts in the empowerment zone offered expanded educational opportunities to youth and adults after normal school hours as part of the SIDEZ Community Learning Center program. Course offerings included tutoring, computer instruction, arts and music, weight lifting and construction. Each school tailored their enriched curriculum to individual district needs. Other organizations offered a diverse array of educational programs with education mini-grants of up to \$2,000. Program topics ranged from fishing to using an automatic external defibrillator to save lives. Shawnee Community College, SIDEZ and other partners sponsored the first-ever Summer Youth Leadership Academy. Fifty youth leaders attended.

**Stronger Unity/Sense of Community Accomplishments:** Community building activities during the year included summer youth recreation programs in four communities, equipment and building improvements at three senior nutrition centers, clean-up of ditches in unincorporated areas and municipal beautification projects. Several communities made park and ball field improvements. Architectural barriers were removed in publicly owned buildings, repairs were made to several community centers and new sidewalks were built along heavily traveled, dangerous roads. **Health Care Accomplishments:** Residents of the empowerment zone came one step closer to having a limited number of hospital beds available in the empowerment zone. Community Health and Emergency Services, Inc. completed preliminary concept drawings for a proposed Critical Access Hospital in Cairo. CHESI will use the drawings to raise other needed funds for the hospital wing. Preventive health care activities received new emphasis during the year. The zone initiated a walking program called "Empowerment Zone Steps."

**Housing Accomplishments:** SIDEZ partnered with USDA-Rural Development, Shawnee Development Council and area realtors to sponsor three home-buying seminars. Assisted living initiatives were supported in Johnson and Pulaski counties and the empowerment zone provided \$100,000 leverage funds for new housing unit construction. Family Counseling Center in Vienna will construct eight one-bedroom apartments for the elderly and disabled and the Alexander County Housing Authority will construct four scattered site homes for low-income residents with SIDEZ assistance.

**Investment in Human Capital** New investment in human resources helped contribute to SIDEZ's success in 2001. Early in the year, each subzone hired a full time project manager. While their primary job duty is economic development, project managers also performed outreach, organized and publicized subzone meetings and assisted community groups in accessing SIDEZ funds. SIDEZ assisted other organizations in building their capacity to carry out elements of the Strategic Plan by helping fund new staff positions. Positions established with zone support included a half time tourism coordinator, a juvenile outreach officer, three county road personnel, a half-time flood plain coordinator and an associate sanitarian. SIDEZ invested in its own leadership by helping send one youth board member to a national leadership conference and sponsoring board training and a working retreat for SIDEZ board members. Summary Communities, organizations and individuals in the Southernmost Illinois Delta Empowerment Zone can proudly point to many accomplishments made during 2001.

In spite of the many positive strides, citizens agree that there is still much work that needs to be done to bring economic prosperity and a high quality of living to all residents of the zone. Long-term economic distress will only be overcome with long-term effort and investment. During 2002, the Southernmost Illinois Delta Empowerment Zone will continue activities that have proven effective and will undertake new activities that will create additional jobs and private sector investment in the zone. Some of the new initiatives SIDEZ will undertake include construction of a business incubator to assist fledgling entrepreneurs, development of the Ohio River waterfront at Cairo to enhance tourism and construction

of a speculative building in Johnson County to attract new business.