

# **LISTENING TO RURAL ALABAMA: A REPORT ON ALABAMA RURAL PROSPERITY FORUMS**



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## INTRODUCTION

*Listening to Rural Alabama* is a descriptive account of deliberative forums held in Alabama in conjunction with the Southern Growth Policy Board (SGPB). Annually, SGPB starts a conversation in the South on a particular issue related to economic development. For 2005, Alabama Governor Bob Riley, as SGPB chair, selected rural development as the theme for the annual report and meeting. The report, "*The 2005 Report on the Future of the South: The New Architecture of Rural Prosperity*,"<sup>1</sup> was presented at the Summit on the Rural South, held June 12-14, 2005, in Point Clear, Alabama.

In preparation for the report, SGPB prepared an issue book to be used in the community deliberative forums. Forums were conducted in 51 communities throughout the southern United States. In all, more than 2200 people shared opinions and ideas that helped shape the *2005 Report on the Future of the South*.

In Alabama, the Auburn University Economic Development Institute (EDI) and the Alabama Center for Civic Life (ACCL) collaborated to arrange forums.<sup>2</sup> From January through March 2005, EDI and ACCL -- with assistance from the Alabama Association of Regional Councils (ACCR), Tuscaloosa's Challenge 21, and the Governor's Black Belt Action Commission - conducted rural prosperity forums throughout the State of Alabama.

Fourteen Alabama communities conducted fifteen forums. Tuscaloosa had two forums, but they were different demographically. The first one was composed primarily of college students from all over the state. The second was composed of Tuscaloosa residents. The other communities (roughly from south to north) were: Dothan, Opp, Robertsedale, Bay Minette, McIntosh, Thomasville, Montgomery, Gadsden, Carrollton, Fayette, and Phil Campbell. In addition, a SGPB-conducted focus group in Selma involved another 40 participants. Approximately 430 citizens participated in these opportunities. Not all participants turned in post-forum questionnaires for quantitative data. EDI/ACCL moderators and recorders made careful notes that capture more about community concerns and political will than can be gleaned from aggregating individual responses. This data, along with observations by EDI/ACCL moderators and recorders, form the basis for this report about rural prosperity forums conducted in Alabama.

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<sup>1</sup> An executive summary can be downloaded at [www.southern.org/pubs/architecturereport2005/execsumm.pdf](http://www.southern.org/pubs/architecturereport2005/execsumm.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> EDI is Auburn University's outreach unit for community and economic development. For more information visit the EDI web site at [www.auburn.edu/edi](http://www.auburn.edu/edi) or call 334-844-4704. ACCL is a nonprofit, non-partisan organization established to study and build civic infrastructure and habits of deliberative decision-making among citizens in Alabama. For more information contact Alabama Center for Civic Life, P.O. Box 2859, Birmingham, AL 35202, 1-877-201-8787 or 1-888-593-1228.

## DYNAMICS OF COMMUNITY FORUMS

Each forum was lead by a moderator, and a recorder captured participants' responses. The SGPB issue book outlined three basic rural development approaches. Following are the three choices and the case for each.

### 1. Cooperate 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. 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. 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 more modern amenities in order to make them attractive to high-growth businesses.*

The dynamic used in forums encourages citizen-to-citizen engagement. Through this process, citizens discuss the advantages, disadvantages, costs, consequences, and acceptable and unacceptable trade-offs among courses of action stemming from each basic choice. This dynamic encourages citizens to work through tensions among things held valuable. For example, how far will citizens 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? The forums produce intelligence that cannot be gleaned from aggregating individual responses as in polls or from questioning individuals in demographic focus groups.

## FINDINGS

### 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. Participants agreed that conducting regular community forums was a good idea. 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, one 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.

The forums revealed that rural residents highly value the personal freedom to use their energy, time, and property as they see fit. 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 and 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."

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.

In post-forum questionnaires, 51% of respondents answered "yes" to the question "*Are you thinking differently about this issue now that you have participated in the forum?*" Sixty-five percent (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. While forum participants may not change their personal views significantly, they are more likely to better understand why others hold different views. This opens up new possibilities for citizens to work together even if they do not fully agree on all matters. As the Kettering Foundation has been learning from communities around the nation, deliberative forums have the potential to build citizen engagement and more productive working relationships among citizens.

## **2. Forum participants identified a number of concerns about development in rural communities, including:**

- ♦ The exodus of young people
- ♦ Lack of citizen involvement
- ♦ Quality of rural public schools
- ♦ Loss of manufacturing jobs (particularly in the textile and apparel sectors)
- ♦ Workforce development issues (including updating worker skills and improving work ethic)
- ♦ Failure to keep up with the spread of technology and telecommunications
- ♦ Declining downtowns (empty buildings)
- ♦ Rural access to health care
- ♦ Lack of public transportation to get to jobs and other services
- ♦ Inadequate water and sewer infrastructure
- ♦ Drug abuse (especially the spread of methamphetamines)
- ♦ Challenges in improving race relations, in some areas now including a growing Hispanic population, and
- ♦ Alabama's constitution and tax structure, which hamper our ability to move successfully into the future.

- 3. Citizens saw value in all three approaches (regional collaboration, embracing change, and building infrastructure) 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 improving infrastructure as a third phase based on needs identified in the first two phases. Some saw building a greater desire for change as the initial step, without which generating regional cooperation would be difficult.

- 4. 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 the desire for economic growth and the desire to maintain small town familiarity and resist outside corporate control of the local economy. In Etowah and Covington Counties, participants complained about lack of knowledge of governmental and economic decisions until after 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 talked about the meaning of collaboration in specific cases. In Opp, citizens focused on finding ways to provide more money for needed improvements.

- 5. Forum participants favored regional approaches and strategies for economic development, without regard to political boundaries. They favored cooperation over consolidation.**

Ninety-six percent (96%) of those answering the post-form 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.*" Ninety-seven percent (97%) agreed with the following action: "*Coordinate or consolidate services between neighboring communities to achieve economies of scale.*" However, forum participants did recognize that tradeoffs exist. They preferred regional cooperation strategies that protect individual community identities, especially when such cooperation might aim at consolidation of jurisdictions. They gave higher value to cooperation than to consolidation.

A participant in the Montgomery forum captured a common sentiment: "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 with this statement, 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.

Likewise, in Pickens County, participants noted the value of regional cooperation in healthcare and for political influence, 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 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 that "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 the low crime rate and community spirit that existed there.

In Tuscaloosa, participants wrestled with how much responsibility to give 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 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 the possible impacts of change from the beginning.

In Houston County, participants felt that losing some identity in order to become 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."

**6. 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 placed *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 they were vocal in rejecting racism as having any current or future part in that heritage.

Forum participants were aware of the changing demographics of the state, especially the growing Hispanic population. Although 84% of those answering the post-form 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 the local labor markets. The decision about whether to embrace change is a matter of mindset. Most forum participants had already made this decision. But, importantly, discussion of the choice allowed citizens to wrestle with their inner and outer tensions about what they valued in an existing way of life versus the change that comes with greater economic development.

**7. Citizens felt that rural needs take a backseat to their urban neighbors and favor increased spending to address rural concerns, especially infrastructure needs.**

An overwhelming majority (86%) of those answering the post-forum questionnaire agreed with the statement: *"Rural communities should make major investments in modern infrastructure EVEN IF it means raising taxes."* The choice of investing in rural infrastructure probably created the greatest tension among the three choices. Despite the strong support for increased investment evidenced in this survey, 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 people's answer to raising taxes to pay for infrastructure is 'Hell no!'"

Forum participants noted that this choice is site specific. Whether or not to give priority to developing infrastructure depends upon the needs in a given community and what sort of infrastructure is being targeted. Many communities have poor tax bases and need outside assistance.

**8. Citizens saw community economic development in very broad terms. That is, economic development is much more than industrial recruitment and involves multiple community agencies, actors, and activities.**

There remains strong support for traditional economic development approaches. This is reflected by the 69% of those answering the post-form questionnaire that agreed with the following action: *"Focus the majority of our resources on industrial recruitment."* However, only 24% "strongly agreed" with this statement. 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.

Some 94% of those answering the post-form questionnaire agreed that we should *"focus the majority of our resources on creating and growing our own businesses."* Of these 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 variable that needs further study. 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. Participants expressed a strong desire to maintain control over local decisions.

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 expressed in most forums.

## **9. Citizen recommendations arising from the forums 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 rural schools
- ♦ Updating worker skills
- ♦ 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 changes 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 changed their lives without their participation. They were ambivalent about increased taxes for infrastructure improvements. Participants desired honest, effective leadership and the 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.

# APPENDIX

## Rural Prosperity: Making Choices for Your Community



### Post-forum Questionnaire

1. Which statement best describes your thoughts about what should be done to secure the future of rural communities?

	<u>Percent</u>
I am not at all sure about what should be done.	5%
I have a general sense of what should be done.	66%
I have a definite opinion about what should be done.	29%

2. Do you agree or disagree with the statements listed below?

Rural communities should band with their neighbors to develop a regional identity, EVEN IF it means losing some of their individual identity. (N=204)

a. Strongly Agree	51%
b. Somewhat Agree	45%
c. Somewhat Disagree	3%
d. Strongly Disagree	0.5%
e. Not Sure	1%

Rural communities should reinvent themselves, EVEN IF it means letting go of some of the things that helped build the community. (N=203)

a. Strongly Agree	43%
b. Somewhat Agree	44%
c. Somewhat Disagree	10%
d. Strongly Disagree	2%
e. Not Sure	0%

Rural communities should make major investments in modern infrastructure EVEN IF it means raising taxes. (N=202)

a. Strongly Agree	40%
b. Somewhat Agree	46%
c. Somewhat Disagree	6%
d. Strongly Disagree	2%

e. Not Sure 4%

3. Do you favor or oppose each of these actions in your community?

Coordinate or consolidate services between neighboring communities to achieve economies of scale. (N=201)

	<u>Percent</u>
a. Strongly Agree	64%
b. Somewhat Agree	33%
c. Somewhat Disagree	2%
d. Strongly Disagree	0.5%
e. Not Sure	0.5%

Teach entrepreneurship skills in K-12 schools. (N=204)

a. Strongly Agree	71%
b. Somewhat Agree	26%
c. Somewhat Disagree	2%
d. Strongly Disagree	0.5%
e. Not Sure	0.5%

Create stronger relationships among businesses. (N=204)

a. Strongly Agree	80%
b. Somewhat Agree	20%
c. Somewhat Disagree	0.5%
d. Strongly Disagree	0%
e. Not Sure	0%

Make special efforts to engage immigrants in business and community life. (N=203)

a. Strongly Agree	38%
b. Somewhat Agree	46%
c. Somewhat Disagree	9%
d. Strongly Disagree	2%
e. Not Sure	4%

Focus the majority of our resources on industrial recruitment. (N=205)

a. Strongly Agree	24%
b. Somewhat Agree	45%
c. Somewhat Disagree	22%
d. Strongly Disagree	6%
e. Not Sure	2%

Focus the majority of our resources on creating and growing our own businesses. (N=204)

a. Strongly Agree	50%
b. Somewhat Agree	44%
c. Somewhat Disagree	5%
d. Strongly Disagree	0%
e. Not Sure	1%

5. Are you thinking differently about this issue now that you have participated in the forum?  
(N=185)

a. Yes	51%
b. No	49%