

## **Grant to be Used to Assess Old High School**

By Josh Troy

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Through the Environmental Protection Agency's Brownfields Assessment Grant of \$400,000 that Helena received, Joe Black, vice president of Southern Development Bancorporation, wants to examine the old Helena High School on Biscoe Street.

The grant is strictly for the assessment stage of abandoned, industrial, and commercial property. Helena has included West Helena as a co-beneficiary of the grant.

Black mentioned the need to check for asbestos in the old Helena High School, which has been abandoned for years.

Following the assessment, the need for cleanup will be evaluated. The assessment phase will take approximately two years.

"The object of the project is to identify redevelopment properties," Black said.

"There are limited funds and the funds must go for redevelopment plans," Black continued.

According to the Brownfields 2004 Grant Fact Sheet, a Brownfield site is real property, the expansion, redevelopment, or reuse of which may be complicated by the presence of a hazardous substance, pollutant, or contaminant.

It further states that on Jan. 11, 2002 President Bush signed into law the Small Business Liability Relief and Brownfields Revitalization Act.

Under the Brownfields Law, EPA provides financial help to eligible applicants through four competitive grant programs: assessment grants, which was the grant obtained by the city of Helena, revolving loan fund grants, cleanup grants, and job training grants.

The community description on the grant fact sheet attributes the decline in population to the abandoned buildings. During the past 30 years, Phillips County has experienced a 34 percent decline in population.

Much of the out-migration can be attributed to the mechanization of agriculture where machines replaced low-skilled workers, and later to the exodus of manufacturers. The loss of

the city's manufacturing base has left the community with abandoned commercial and industrial facilities.

Black referred to the old Helena High School as a "strategic location" for reuse. He called the Brownfield Assessment Grant an "economic development tool."

Since the grant is an ongoing long-term project, Black said there was plenty of time to think about how to approach things for the old Helena High School.

Helena West-Helena School District Superintendent Willie Easter expressed his support for the program.

"I think it is a wonderful opportunity for the district to remove the property at a minimal cost," Easter said.

Black added taking immediate action could avoid a lawsuit from the EPA for airborne contaminants and asbestos.

The Helena-West Helena School Board unanimously voted to look at the old Helena High School and other additional district sites.