

Groundbreaking Held for New Health Center

By Josh Troy

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In front of a standing room only crowd with many dignitaries on hand including U.S. Senator and Helena native Blanche Lincoln, the groundbreaking ceremony for the new \$4 million Dr. P Vasuedvan Delta Area Health Education Center took place. The event was held Thursday morning at Phillips Community College's Fine Arts Center.

West Helena's new facility will be one of seven Delta AHEC buildings in Arkansas. The other six are located in El Dorado, Fayetteville, Fort Smith, Jonesboro, Pine Bluff, and Texarkana. The Arkansas AHEC program was founded in 1973. The Delta AHEC, created by Arkansas legislation through use of state tobacco settlement funds, was established July 1, 2001.

The new 25,000 square foot center will be more than 5 1/2 times larger than the current AHEC. It will be located in West Helena at the intersection of the Highway 49 Bypass and Highway 242.

The building is owned by the Helena Health Foundation, which will lease the building to the University of Arkansas Medical Sciences Delta AHEC. It was made possible through financing provided by Southern Development Bancorporation and a \$4 million loan guarantee from the United States Department of Agriculture.

"I'm glad to see that spirit is so alive in the community I love and call home," said Lincoln.

Lincoln stated that building the new center was an example of "dreaming the big dreams."

"There are no quick fixes," Lincoln said. "There is no pill that we're going to take and make everything perfect."

Lincoln stressed that the facility was one way local residents helped improve Phillips County. She called it a "collective effort".

"It is about our personal responsibility to strengthen our community," Lincoln said. "This is about making us strong enough and leaving a legacy."

Lincoln said she would be in Washington fighting on behalf of Phillips County residents.

"It's not my job to dream your dreams," Lincoln said. "It's my job to make your dreams become a reality."

Vasuedvan, who was the guest of honor, stressed that this effort showed the commitment to long-term results to the public's wellness and quality of life.

Vasuedvan named some of the items that would be in the new facility, which include a classroom, a health fitness center, an indoor and outdoor track, and an auditorium that will seat approximately 100.

"This team effort is the result of compassionate people who were determined to provide better healthcare in the Delta," Vasuedvan said. "This will improve the quality of life for thousands, and save many lives, as well."

"It's a wonderful day for Phillips County and it's a whole new start for health and wellness in Phillips County," said Becky Hall, director of Delta AHEC. "We want the center to be used by all citizens of Phillips County and we will do all we can to make sure everyone feels a part of the center."

"This project sterling example of what we can do in the Delta when we work together," said Rep. Arnell Willis.

"I am just so thankful to the Helena Health Foundation and Dr. Vasudevan," said Helena Mayor Dr. Robert Miller. "Your time and effort made this a reality."

Dr. Charles Cranford, vice chancellor of UAMS Regional Programs, praised everyone involved for their work.

"That tells me if people have a vision and a dream, just give it to a determined group and they will make it happen," Cranford said. "No one entity can do it all. We have to have community partners and we have wonderful community partners here in Helena."

"This is really a marvelous facility and a home run for your state," said UAMS Chancellor I. Dodd Wilson.

USDA Community Loan Specialist Stephen Lagasse said the new center was a "fine example" of using federal tax dollars to make local improvements.

"It's a fine example of partnership and teamwork," Lagasse said.

University of Arkansas President Dr. Alan Sugg praised Cranford for his work on UAMS programs. He thanked Lincoln for her support.

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"Blanche Lincoln is one of the most respected and appreciated senators in the U.S. Senate," said Sugg.

"It's a great day for Phillips County and Eastern Arkansas," concluded Sugg.

Lizzy Tillman, who has been going to Delta AHEC for two years, gave a testimonial that received a standing ovation.

"The Delta AHEC is a blessing for this community," Tillman said. Tillman said that Delta AHEC made her feel welcome from the start.

"Delta AHEC is like a family to me," Tillman said. "We need this wellness center."

HFF Chair Victor Juengel praised Vasuedvan's work. Vasuedvan is the HFF executive director.

"He (Vasuedvan) is our guiding force," Juengel said. "He has made such a tremendous contribution to the community and Delta AHEC."

"A celebration of this magnitude doesn't happen without hard work," said Phil Baldwin, who served as master of ceremonies and is president and CEO of Southern Development Bancorporation. "The AHEC is a big dream. I congratulate you for dreaming that dream."