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Neighborhood Clean-up Initiative receives \$50,000 Grant from Southern

Phillip N. Baldwin, President and CEO of Southern Bancorp (Southern), announced today an award of \$50,000 to the City of Helena's Property Standards Board for the demolition of abandoned and deteriorating buildings and the elimination of debris within the city. Funds will be used for the further implementation of housing and redevelopment goals as set out in the Phillips County Strategic Plan. The product of a 10-month planning process that involved hundreds of hours of input from over 300 Phillips County residents, the strategic plan was completed in December, 2004 and unanimously adopted in January, 2005.

In making the announcement, Baldwin stated, "I am pleased to announce this grant on behalf of the Executive Committee of Southern Bancorp. Southern is deeply committed to assisting Phillips County in implementing the strategic plan that so many of its residents worked so hard to create. We believe in the vision set out in that plan, and we are working along side the people of this county to make that vision a reality."

"This second \$50,000 grant from Southern builds on the success of Helena's Property Standards Board," stated Baldwin. "With the first \$50,000, the City of Helena demolished 35 substandard structures that had marred the community for years. Working with the City of Helena, we removed buildings that were a public nuisance in historic downtown Helena, north Helena, and along busy transportation corridors such as Biscoe Street where the abandoned Louisiana Fried Chicken building was blighting the neighborhood and giving a negative impression of Helena to residents and visitors alike," he said.

According to Cathy Cunningham, Community Development Coordinator for Southern, this most recent grant will support the Property Standards Board's initiative in a number of important ways. "Specifically, it will provide one-year, interest free loans to help owners who are unable to pay the full cost of the demolition at the time it occurs. It will subsidize the clean up of badly blighted entrances to the city, particularly Biscoe Street from the Mississippi River Bridge to downtown Helena; and it will allow the Property Standards Board to place liens on abandoned properties until they can be sold or acquired for taxes," she said.

"This funding will also start the process of identifying and determining ownership of substandard buildings in West Helena so that revitalization can begin quickly once the election of a mayor and city council completes the merger of Helena and West Helena in January of 2006," added Michael Boone, Community Development Representative for Southern.

According to John King, Chairman of Helena's Property Standards Board, the new \$50,000 in funding from Southern will allow the city to continue clean-up efforts started late last year. "The city could not do this without the grant. This funding will allow us to take the eyesores out of the city," he stated

Mayor Robert Miller shares King's enthusiasm for the initiative. "When I first filed to run for mayor, the clean-up of the city was my first priority, especially the area between the bridge and town. I understand that it is finally going to happen. It is just a blessing that Southern has come along to help," he stated.

End

Picture cut line: Mayor Robert Miller and John King, Chairman of the City of Helena's Property Standards Board with Cathy Cunningham and Michael Boone from Southern at the site of the recently demolished Louisiana Fried Chicken building.