

Strategic Community Plan Revealed

By Michele Page

August 9, 2005

The Strategic Community Plan for Phillips County 2005-2010 was officially unveiled Monday at the Historic Malco Theater during a news conference with banners announcing "Together We Can."

Several guest speakers gave their plans for the future of the county to a full house. The primary plan centers on economic development for tourism, business and job establishment, housing development and redevelopment, education, leadership development, and health care. The plan took 13 months and the participation of 300 Phillips County residents to come up with 46 goals and 190 action plans.

Several organizations jumped on the bandwagon to help rediscover the potential Phillips County has. They included Southern Bancorp Development Bank Holding Co. and the University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences (UAMS). The plan was funded by a grant from the Walton Family Foundation and is a first of its kind for Phillips County.

"The most important product was the sense of renewed optimism the plan creates for the county," said Dr. Steven Murray, chancellor of Phillips Community College. Murray also spoke of the potential in revenue the area has because of its proximity to Tunica and the \$12 million they generate in tourism. He would like to see Phillips County net just five percent of that money.

Ever Jean Ford, chair of the housing goal team announced plans for a \$1.3 million Southern Place Apartments that will house two and 3 bedroom apartments. There are a proposed 20 units and construction is scheduled to begin before the end of the year. It should be completed and ready for occupancy no later than March 31, 2006.

The plan calls for replacement of existing substandard housing, especially those houses in the historic corridor from the Helena Bridge to downtown Helena and the over-the-levee area.

Ruthie Pride, a citizen of West Helena, spoke on the power of change. As a life-long resident, she said that she was proud and excited for the community.

"It is not a handout and with a willing heart and a little bit of patience, the plan can succeed," said Pride.

She also addressed how many lives will be touched as hers has been and what a good community this is to live in with "faith, friends and hope."

Local attorney Brian Miller will head up the local development council for the planning committee. He spoke on the funding for the plan and how the "sun was going down on Phillips County," to quote Elton John. He spoke of the funding council and the programs to help fund the change that will result. He thanked the presidents of both banks who worked closely together for the future of the county.

"The financing of such plan will be ongoing," said Phil Baldwin president and chief executive officer of Southern Bancorp, which owns several community development banks in Arkansas and Mississippi. "We have some money in hand and resources already working, but primarily we will be helping match priorities with funding sources that will include grants, government, foundations and private contributions. There are many agencies and organizations that have committed to helping us find the resources we need to bring this plan to life."

Dr. B. Alan Sugg, president of the University of Arkansas System and co-chair of the Friends of Phillips County Steering Committee thanked Baldwin for his "compassionate and enlightened leadership."

A support group is being organized and will be made up of Phillips County natives from across Arkansas and all walks of life.

"The FOPC will be our cheerleaders, our recruiters, and our voice in getting the word out about the progress we are making here," said Murray. "Getting this work done is going to take a lot of people and talent from many backgrounds. The Friends will help us find the right people for the job."

Larry Walther, director of the Arkansas Department of Economic Development, spoke about the endorsement of Gov. Mike Huckabee. He said that people were proud to live and work in Phillips County.

"People care about this community and can make the difference," he said.

The most famous speaker was Helena native U.S. Senator Blanche Lincoln. The "First Daughter" of Phillips County talked about all the memories she had right in the Malco and how much things had changed. She spoke of the value the community has with its teachers,

churches and relatives who lived "close enough you could walk there." She spoke of her race for the Senate and how because of the roots she has here she knew it was the place for her.

Lincoln said she had witnessed the hard work to make the changes necessary for Phillips County to prosper. She chanted, "together we can."

Joe Black, the senior vice president of Southern Financial Partners, quoted *Gone With The Wind* saying, "Babies, I don't know nuthin' about birthin' no babies," and then stated that they had birthed a baby

"When was the last time you saw this many people on Cherry Street?" he concluded.