

ON THE BRICKS

PARTNERS IN PROGRESS

By Steven W. Jones and
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Economic growth has not occurred since the mid-sixties in Phillips County and in most of rural eastern Arkansas. The population in Phillips County today is 25 percent less than it was 20 years ago when Phillips County Community College was conceived. Unemployment is twice the national average. Two major industries employing over 800 workers with combined payrolls exceeding \$15 million have closed in Helena-West Helena within the last two years alone.

When John Easley-, president of Phillips County Community College, was approached by a consortium of community leaders and asked to help with community development, the response was more positive than anyone had imagined.

After all, community is the first word in "community college" and "community development." If a community college is to survive in times of economic insecurity, it must support its community by meeting not only its educational needs but also by providing every service it can to improve the quality of life in the community and to assure the very future of the community.

Community development is a phrase that has become common in our everyday language. When we talk about community development and growth we are usually talking about creating more jobs for more people, expanding the quantity and quality of public services, striving for economic stability, improving housing and schools, and solving other problems that perplex our communities. Often the list of problems seems much longer than the possible solutions.

In previous decades growth was something that often just "happened" to an area. Today, given so many economic uncertainties, growth must be carefully

planned. Community development must be a meticulously designed process.

When Arkansas Delta Development, Inc., an industrial search firm, was established in eastern Arkansas, its executive director, John Gatling, realized there were many questions that had to be answered before growth could take place.

Before industrial expansion could occur, the county had to be prepared for the in-

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creased population and the demands that would accompany it. In order to estimate the need, current statistics needed to be examined. How much housing was available? How much financing was available to support increased demands for housing? What impact would increased population have on local school systems, public services, sewers, police and fire protection, retail establishments, utilities, medical services, recreational facilities, sanitation demands? These questions simply could not be answered.

Enter Phillips County Community College. Through the Office of Institutional Planning and Research, the community was able to find the vehicle it needed to launch a major industrial and community development planning process to answer these questions.

Local and county officials were able to draw upon the expertise of the college's personnel to design and implement the necessary planning studies. In June and July 1982, the college conducted a county-wide housing survey. Households in Phillips County were contacted by members of specially trained survey teams, each member a student at Phillips County Community College.

Over 8,000 households were contacted and interviewed regarding educational levels, housing structure, rent, utilities, handicapped status, income levels, and other demographic characteristics of the area population.

Over 7,000 man hours of labor were required to complete the project. All data were entered into the college's computer by PCCC student workers, and over three million possible data combinations were analyzed to prepare a final report for the city mayors and various agencies involved in the community development effort.

Additional studies are being conducted by the college at this time to determine land absorption rates, public service expansion needs, health care inventories, educational system capacity levels, and commercial/economic impacts.

"We have already experienced changes in attitudes as a result of our efforts," said Gatling. "There is a kind of growth taking place now which comes not only from external influences, but from within ourselves. As we generate new information

about our community, as we better understand our problems, our needs, and our aspirations, as we learn to make decisions thoughtfully and fairly for the good of the community as a whole, we indeed are developing."

"Yet to sustain a continued development, positive growth must also come from external sources," Gatling added. "Through expanded educational opportunities a community can better attract the types of industrial expansion that are a catalyst to expanded employment opportunities. Perhaps this is the reason that Americans have always placed such a high prerogative on education."

Reacting to this need for technically skilled labor to attract industry to the area, Phillips County Community College again responded positively. The college, foreseeing the need for expanded occupational education to attract industrial prospects, began planning the Technical Education Complex. The new facility was dedicated by Governor Frank White in January of

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this year as a symbol of the college's responsiveness to community needs.

The new \$2.1 million industrial training complex contains over 40,000 square feet of classrooms and laboratories to train students in industrial electronics and instrumentation, welding and construction technology, air conditioning and refrigeration, civil technology and drafting, and several other high technology curricula. Anticipating increased needs for health care services in the future, the college expanded its nursing programs, doubled its medical laboratory technology program, and established a new radiologic technician program. Computer technology and other technical business programs were also expanded to provide the necessary skilled labor force to attract business and industry to eastern Arkansas.

The positive attitudes of the people of Phillips County and eastern Arkansas reached fruition late this summer when a major industrial announcement was made.

Governor White once again returned to Phillips County and Phillips County Community College to acknowledge publicly that the hard work of Arkansas Delta Development, the area chamber of commerce, and the people of eastern Arkansas was beginning to pay handsome dividends.

The governor announced that the area's economy will be strengthened by the development of a \$72 million slack-water harbor on the Mississippi River and an adjacent 5,000-acre industrial park. The project will be phased in over a period of 10 years. Industrial giants such as Monsanto and Mobay have already expressed interest in the new harbor project, and scores of other industries are sure to follow their lead in further developing eastern Arkansas.

And Phillips County will be ready when the growth occurs. Through the joint efforts of community leaders and the community college, Arkansas Delta Development has made certain of that.

"It's been somewhat of a yellow brick road experience for us," explained Gatling. "We've had our ups and downs along the way, but we've made definite, measurable progress toward our goals. We don't expect to wake up tomorrow in Emerald City or anything like that, but we are getting ready to move into a new era in Phillips County, in eastern Arkansas, in the mid-South."

As partners in progress, the community and its college are each dependent upon the other for strength and support. In Phillips County, Arkansas, community is indeed the first word in "community college."



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