



Advocates for Community and Rural Education

Eudora begins community revitalization



Eudora townspeople and guests attended a community forum for assessment on January 8 to kick off their revitalization project.

Ninety-two community members and guests were present on January 8 as the town of Eudora kicked off its Rural Community Revitalization project with Advocates for Community and Rural Education.

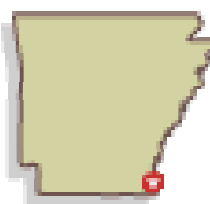
Following ACRE's intergenerational model of organizing, community members from youth to seniors participated in this first meeting designed to start the once thriving town back on the road to progress and prosperity.

The project allows ACRE organizers, staff, and volunteers to bring together community members in declining rural communities with resources in the areas of education, economic development, the environment, community services, and arts and heritage in a process that includes assessment, visioning and planning, and implementation of a strategic plan for their town.

ACRE's Rural Community Revitalization program is made possible by a grant from the Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation. Also contributing directly or indirectly to the community revitalization efforts are the Marguerite Casey Foundation, C.S. Mott/Southern

Echo, Southern Partners Fund, the Rural School and Community Trust, and the Ben and Jerry Foundation.

Located in the southeastern corner of the state between Lake Village, AR, and Lake Providence, LA, Eudora is like many small rural Arkansas communities. Although in decline economically and population-wise for the past quarter of a century, its residents are strong, proud, and committed to a comeback.



Profile of Eudora

The population of Eudora in 2007 was 2,531, down from 2,819 at the 2000 census. It is one of three towns in Chicot County, which shows a similar population decline of -8.5%.

The local median household income is \$17,857, compared to \$32,182 for the state and \$41,994 for the nation.

Eighty-five per cent of the population is African-American, while 14% is white and 1% is Hispanic.

The town has a doctor's office, library, police department, fire department, and city water and sewer service. Major employers are a catfish processing plant and the Eudora Garment Corporation,

(SEE **Eudora** on p. 2)

SmartEdge—Smart financial training for tough economic times

In keeping with its mission to serve rural communities, schools, and youth, ACRE has entered into an agreement with GMAC Financial Services to be able to conduct courses in financial management with the SmartEdge financial literacy training.

Offered as a community service and outreach by GMAC, SmartEdge is taught free of charge to people age 17 and above.

The class is conducted by an ACRE trainer for groups of 30 or more. It includes Power Point instruction on the subjects of Budgeting and Credit, Banking, Vehicle and Home Finance, and Insurance.

The class is scheduled in four approximately one-hour modules. Each student receives a free workbook.

Although produced and sponsored by GMAC, the program in no way promotes financial services offered by GMAC.

ACRE has 20 certified trainers who have been trained to educate others in personal financial literacy. The organization offers the training as a service to their chapters, schools, and communities.

"This is excellent training for anyone, but especially for high school seniors going off to college or entering the workforce," says ACRE Executive Director Renee Carr. To schedule a class, e-mail cpa@mvtel.net or call 870-363-4411.



Don Ferguson of GMAC Financial Services training ACRE members on presenting the SmartEdge Financial Literacy course.

Eudora, cont.

specializing in manufacturing medical, fast-food, and service uniforms.

The J. Austin White Cultural Center offers music, art, theater, and other activities for children and youth, and several other organizations and ministries exist to work with youth and community.



People come to Eudora, says longtime resident Erma Toney, to visit family and friends, to fish and hunt, or for seasonal vacations. A few people move there, especially after retiring, because it is a quiet, safe-haven sort of place to live after experiencing the fast hustle and bustle of city life.

History of Eudora

Eudora was founded in 1877 by Dr. S.A. Scott, who came to Planters Township from Louisiana in 1853. Naming the town after his daughter, he promoted growth by laying out the town in 1902 and building houses.

The town's greatest growth came in the early 1900's when the railroad brought much trade to the territory. Major industries were the cotton gin and lumber mills.

As with many rural towns, decline in the agricultural economy and depletion of forests brought about loss of the cotton gin, sawmill, and railroad. Subsequently the town lost its movie theater, many of the downtown stores, and most recently the school.

Closing the school

Losing the school has perhaps been the bitterest pill to swallow.

Despite a valiant fight by the community, in 2006 the Arkansas Department of Education forced the Eudora School District with its 600+ students into consolidation with the Lakeside School District.

Lakeside promptly closed down all but kindergarten through third grade, citing the cost of maintaining the school. Students in grades four through twelve were bused 17 miles away to Lake Village.

One Eudora residents says losing the school "has brought a hardship on parents and students financially and mentally. Students are put off the bus for a combination of reasons which do not always line up with the rules....This causes working parents to have to leave their children at home without supervision or the cost of gas and wear and tear on their automobile."

"Its effect on the town has been a drop in population because [parents] don't trust their children having to ride that far." Earlier this year, three buses full of students making the transfer collided outside Eudora, injuring dozens of children.

Revitalization and rebirth

Revitalization project leader at Eudora, Erma Toney, says that she would describe Eudora today as a city "that has lost some of its valuable assets but is in a position to birth out again." She hopes to see "a booming new town with the people coming together for the good of the city."

Leadership training



The revitalization project started with a leadership training on December 9 by Brenda Hyde (above), assistant director of Southern Echo in Jackson, MS, and Melvin and Marilyn Young of Citizens for a Better Tunica County in Tunica, MS.

The training covered qualities of a leader and how to overcome challenges and barriers to success.

ACRE's Eudora Revitalization project

After surveying the community, the Eudora leadership team scheduled a Community Forum for Assessment on January 9.

At this meeting, Eudora youth gave a Power Point presentation on the Natural Resources of the area. They

were given technical assistance and training by Mary Smith, Education Director of Audubon Arkansas.



ACRE Executive Director Renee Carr presented a Community Assessment that detailed some of the history of Eudora, as well as its strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and challenges.

Resources agencies who sent representatives to the meeting included Butch Calhoun of the Department of Rural Services, Mary Smith of Audubon Arkansas, Wanda Madera of the Southeast Arkansas Planning and Development District, Rachel Silva of the Department of Arkansas Heritage/Historic Preservation, Richard Moss of the University of Arkansas Cooperative Extension Service (Little Rock), and Kathryn Peacock of UAM Arkansas Small Business & Technology Development Center.

Each resource agency representative spent some time explaining what their agency had to offer the revitalization efforts.

Other notables attending the event were Rep. Robert Moore, Sen. Jimmy Jeffress, County Judge Mack Ball, and former County Judge Mary Turner.

After discussion of areas where the community wanted to concentrate revitalization efforts, the group decided to establish focus groups in the areas of education, economic development/community services, city beautification, arts and heritage, natural resources/environment, and youth development.

The focus groups will meet biweekly for the next two months and then make recommendations to the community in a Visioning/Planning Forum on March 23.



Above left: Mayor William Stanton
Right: Youth Development Focus Group leader Kadajah Butler.

Delight reaches planning stage of revitalization project

The Delight community moved along their community revitalization project with a Visioning-Planning Forum on December 4, 2008.

At this forum each focus group presented up to five recommendations that their members had discussed in the preceding two months.

The Natural Resources focus group recommendations:

- Develop a nature trail
- Improve the esthetics of the area's artesian wells
- Promote canoeing around the Antoine River
- Preserve the natural buzzard habitat
- Create a natural play space for children to learn about and experience nature

The Education focus group had one recommendation: Save the school.

The Economic Development focus group recommendations:

- Develop a city website
- Promote eco-tourism
- Improve the city park
- Fix up the downtown area

- Take down abandoned houses
- Create a courtyard and picnic area and encourage use by local musicians, paint murals on buildings
- Develop a Glen Campbell Museum
- Promote Delight as a "bedroom community" for surrounding larger towns

The City Beautification focus group recommendations:

- RV park
- Tourist lodging
- Welcome signs
- Flower Baskets, decorated trash barrels in business areas
- Hiking trail to Wolf Creek

The Arts and Heritage Focus Group recommendations:

- Restore Rosenwald School
- Create Historic District
- Set up flea market in old Humphrey Grocery

Focus Group leaders are now meeting with project leader Carol Hale to develop a strategic plan from these priorities.

Leslie holds Community Forum for Planning



Community members voting on Focus Group recommendations for Leslie strategic plan.

A large crowd filled the Ozarks Heritage and Arts Center in Leslie on Monday, January 12, to hear the results of two months of work by Focus Groups on their community revitalization project.

Ninety-three people were there to listen and vote to prioritize recommendations in the areas of Education, Economic Development, Arts and Heritage, City Beautification, Natural Resources, and Community Services. Recommendations in order of importance to the community are as follows:

Economic Development:

- Develop overall marketing/public relations plan for Leslie.
- Expand high-speed Internet availability
- Develop a Merchants' Association
- Develop a website and promotional brochure
- Research grants

Arts and Heritage

- Spring/Fall Fest, Farmers' Market
- Develop Arts on Tour program
- Support OHAC weekly events
- Make a documentary about the town
- Encourage Historic Registry membership

City Beautification

- Improve entrance from Hwy. 65
- Spruce up main street
- Plan private property clean-up
- Develop a Community Watch

Community Services

- Develop walking/running track
- Develop outdoor recreation area
- Expand community center with fitness center
- Develop a preschool at the elementary
- Build senior apartments

Education

- Attach Career Center to a community college program
- Work on turning elementary into a conversion charter school
- Develop a Creative Learning Co-op for home schoolers
- Get Internet/computer access for the public
- Education community building

Environment/Natural Resources

- Recycling drop point
- Community Garden
- Encourage planting of native trees and plants, butterfly garden
- Stream teams
- Energy and water conservation efforts

The next stage of the revitalization project is for Focus Group leaders and Project leader Talitha Hardin to write a strategic plan from these recommendations.

Delight youth receive entrepreneurship training

On December 4 seven Delight High School seniors received training from ACRE Policy and Education Director Lavina Grandon in writing a business plan.

Attending this training makes the students eligible for Youth Enterprise seed money of up to \$400 for start-ups of small businesses.

The initial training will be followed by additional instruction on financial management and accounting conducted by ACRE Executive Director Renee Carr, who is a certified public accountant, before the youth are mentored in starting their own small businesses.

The Delight Youth Enterprise project is funded by a grant from the Arkansas Community Development Society.



Leslie Focus Group leaders Bill Derickson, Loni Kelly, Michelle Ragland, Steven Newby, Ryan Cloud, Brenda Lewis, and Adrienne Lafargue.

To see more pictures and complete details of all three ACRE revitalization projects, go to www.aracre.org.

Save our schools

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www.aracre.org

Poyen, Bismarck moving forward

Poyen superintendent Jerry Newton reports that district is on a building program that will soon have replaced both its 7-12 high school and its K-6 elementary school.

Two years ago **Poyen** completed a new high school, and then school district patrons passed a more than seven mill tax increase to fund the new elementary school now under construction.

Newton credits the state's facilities program with allowing them to build state-of-the-art facilities with an 80/20 match in funds.

In recent years the district has also added a new baseball field, softball field, and football stadium, all paid for with local funds.

Newton is equally proud of the district's strides in academic achievement. **Poyen** is one of several districts in the state that participate in High Schools That Work, a program by the Southern Regional Education Board to raise achievement of high school students by combining challenging academic courses with modern career/technical studies. In December **Poyen** students scored an impressive 23.5 on the ACT.

Poyen High School, along with **Bismarck**, was one of only 40 Arkansas high schools to be named to *U.S. News and World Report's* "America's Best High Schools" (see article at right). For links and more pictures, visit our website at www.aracre.org.



ACRE newsletter readers may remember that in September 2007 the **Bismarck** Save Our School group ran a spirited millage campaign to build a new high school and save the district from being placed on "facilities distress."

Bismarck School District is very excited to be breaking ground on Arkansas' first US Green Building Council's LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) High School.

Green Schools provide productive learning environments with ample natural lighting, high-quality acoustics, and air that is safe to breathe. This provides a healthy environment for both students and teachers, which focuses on being water, energy, and resource efficient.

The estimated cost of the 86,000 sq. ft. fully furnished structure will be \$14,500,000, with \$7,760,000, of the funds being provided through the State Partnership Building Program. The two-story structure will have 19 classrooms, a full science lab, 3 computer labs, a media center, a physical education gym with locker rooms, an Agriculture classroom and shop, a Family and Consumer Science classroom with kitchen lab and sewing lab, a vocal music room, a band room with ensemble practice and storage areas, a kitchen/dining area for 300 students and a stage/auditorium to seat 500. With over 90 closed circuit security cameras, along with 5 electronic security keycard access entrances, the safety of students is even further enhanced.



40 Arkansas schools in "America's Best"

In December *U.S. News and World Report* magazine released its list of "America's Best High Schools," with 40 Arkansas schools appearing on the list.

Methodology

School Evaluation Services, a division of *Standard and Poor's*, did the research for *U.S. News*. They chose schools that serve all students well and "can produce measurable academic outcomes to show they are educating [students] across a range of indicators."

Of the 21,000 public high schools in the nation, they chose 1,925 to be ranked as gold, silver, or bronze schools. Arkansas had four silver and 36 bronze schools.

Interestingly, eight of the recognized school districts have fewer than 500 students in K-12. Two of them, *Leslie* and *Mt. Pleasant*, have been recently closed by Act 60 consolidations, while another, *Cushman*, will probably be consolidated this year. Twenty-two of the recognized districts have between 500 and 1,000 students in K-12. Only 10 have over 1,000 students.

Recognized High Schools

The four high schools ranked as "silver" by the report were *Bentonville*, *Rison*, *Searcy*, and *Valley Springs*.

The high schools ranked "bronze" included *Acorn*, *Batesville*, *Benton*, *Bismarck*, *Caddo Hills*, *Cotter*, *Cushman*, *Danville*, *Dardanelle*, *Flippin*, *Highland*, *Hoxie*, *Huntsville*, *Magazine*, *Jessieville*, *Lamar*, *Leslie*, *Magnet Cove*, *Marked Tree*, *McCrary*, *Mena*, *Mtn. View*, *Mt. Ida*, *Mt. Pleasant*, *Nemo Vista*, *Norfolk*, *Ouachita*, *Poyen*, *Salem*, *Spring Hill*, *Taylor*, *Timbo*, *Valley View*, *Viola*, *Westside* (Johnson County), and *Williford*.

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