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New Approaches to Rural Development

Macomb, IL: The economic recession is causing community leaders, especially in rural areas, to take new approaches in trying to stimulate local economic development and job creation because some of the old ways no longer work in the current environment. The Illinois Institute for Rural Affairs (IIRA), located at Western Illinois University, hosted its 21st annual conference in Peoria on March 3-4 to explore new development opportunities and to learn from leaders in other regions who have succeeded with innovative approaches.

Michael Ellis and Rhonda Timmons of the Seneca Development Organization participated in the conference along with more than 300 elected officials and community leaders from around Illinois and neighboring states. The conference provided an opportunity for participants to learn new strategies to attract businesses and create jobs. It also provided an opportunity for rural Illinois community leaders to discuss difficulties encountered in promoting local development and stemming the outmigration of youth from rural communities.

Highlighting the conference were presentations by Will Lamb, University of North Carolina, who described successful new and innovative approaches taken by communities in southern states to revitalize local economies. These small communities, many in rural areas, have adopted entrepreneurial approaches to stimulate business creation, expand local markets, and otherwise help the local economies.

Kim Huston from Bardstown, Kentucky, author of *Small Town Sexy*, told the group that small towns have assets that cannot be duplicated in larger communities and that these strengths are highly-sought after by younger generations. She worked with community leaders to find and identify these assets as well as market them to potential business investors.

The conference provided opportunities for participants to attend formal presentations but also to work on local issues in small groups. In some instances, this participation will lead to continued collaboration, and ultimately to joint projects or strategies.

“This rural development conference offers an opportunity for elected officials and leaders in small Illinois communities to hear new ideas and approaches. The large turnout shows that community leaders are committed to improving the quality of life in their areas. The IIRA is proud to provide this opportunity for local leaders to learn from their peers on this important issue.” said Christopher D. Merrett, IIRA director.

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