

# Rural towns see a bright future

By RILEY GARDAM

As two-thirds of Iowa's counties have seen their populations decline during the past 10 years, leaders in the state's southeastern region are confident the future is bright.

"Rather than resting on their laurels and relying on their existing assets to get by, leaders in Lee and surrounding counties continue to strive for improvements," says Yvonne Knapp, director, Lee County Economic Development Group.

Economic-development efforts are evident in the list of the leading businesses in the region, which reads more like a bustling metropolis than a region with a population of less than 40,000.

"Rural America tends to progress at the rhythm of a pendulum," says Bill Menner, USDA Rural Development state director in Iowa. "Southeast Iowa has chosen to use this downturn as a period to regroup and organize a plan for moving forward."

Despite the slow economic recovery process, southeast Iowa has recently had many expansion and relocation projects, including Siemens Energy, DuPont, Roquette, Pinnacle, Matt's Green House and many others. For example, since the first wind turbine blade came off the line in February 2007, the Siemens facility in

Fort Madison has expanded from 200 employees to 800 employees.

"The banking environment continues to be strong, and the industries in the area continue to grow and make investments in their facilities," says Matthew Morris, president and chief executive officer, Fort Madison Bank and Trust. "We are fortunate to have a very diverse employer base, and we are attractive to new business because of the low cost of living, good school systems and central location in the country."

Community offerings such as parks, trails, recreation complexes and good transitional housing are also important economic-development tools. "Jobs are very important, but attracting those jobs takes other community assets that are easy to forget about, but essential in the recruitment process," says Morris.

## Build on a strong ag base

USDA recently awarded funds to help the Southeast Iowa Regional Economic and Port Authority develop a master strategic plan for the area. One outcome of this plan was the creation of a "shovel-ready" site that provides an attractive location for new and existing businesses in the area.

Leaders in southeast Iowa continue to stress local growth and are developing ways to build upon the area's strong agri-



**FARMERS MARKETS:** More communities in southeast Iowa are using the region's strong agricultural base as a foundation for economic growth.

cultural base. Local businesses recently received nearly \$250,000 in USDA Rural Development grants to support technical assistance for the development of local foods systems. The funds came in the form of the agency's Rural Community Development Initiative and the Rural Business and Enterprise Grants.

"Tremendous progress has been made that will serve the communities well into the foreseeable future through leadership combined with community empowerment," Knapp says. "But the work in southeast Iowa is far from finished."

A proposed project called "Go RuralLEE" would encourage the consolidation of surrounding small towns to gain stronger bargaining power and cut costs on municipal

functions. The program is projected to cut down on competition for funds and jobs in the area, while saving existing jobs that would otherwise be terminated due to a lack of available funds. It is also projected to boost economic and community development via new programs using the area's natural resources.

"The long-term goal is to be a strong network of healthy and prosperous communities with a high quality of life, a sustainable environment, a wealth of personal and professional opportunities, and a strong capacity for economic growth created by and for the people who live and work here," says Knapp.

*Gardam, a college student, was a summer intern with USDA Rural Development.*

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