Helena/Phillips County, Arkansas

Helena/Phillips County Community Profile

Helena and West Helena are located in Phillips County, Arkansas on the West bank of the Mississippi River in a region called the Mississippi River Delta. Much of the information for the area is available at the county level, and it comes from a variety of sources compiled in different years.

Agriculture is important to the county, which produces cotton, rice, soybeans, corn, and sorghum. In 1997, the county ranked 69th in the nation in the production of soybeans, 46th in rice, and 25th in cotton.

The non-farm economy of Phillips County is driven by services, retail trade, and manufacturing, which have the largest numbers of employees. In 1997, there were 6,020 employees in the county, 27 percent in services, 26 percent in retail trade, and 17 percent in manufacturing. The comparison to Arkansas is shown in the following Table.

Employees	Phillips Co.	Arkansas
Services	27%	29%
Retail Trd.	26%	22%
Manuf'ing	17%	27%

There were 567 establishments in Phillips County in 1997, with 33 percent in retail trade and 32 percent in services. None of the establishments employed more than 500 persons; 88 percent of them employed fewer than 20 persons.

Estabmts.	Phillips Co.	Arkansas
Services	32%	34%
Retail Trd.	33%	26%
Manuf'ing	4%	7%

The population of Phillips County was estimated at 27,049 on July 1, 1999, down 0.9 percent from the year before. Population was down 4.2 percent from 1990 to 1997. In 1996, the population was 42 percent white and 57.1 percent black.

Educational attainment in Phillips County, for persons 25 years and over in 1990, was 51.5 percent for high school graduates (compared to 66.3 percent for the state) and 9.2 percent for college graduates (compared to 16.1 percent for the state).

Per capita income in Phillips County was $10,729 in 1990 ($13,784 for the state) and $13,523 in 1994 ($16,863 for the state).

The Arkansas Workshop

Based on the TEAM Delta workshop held in Monticello, Arkansas on May 2, 2000, the current major issues in Phillips, Drew, and Desha Counties, Arkansas, include:

- Education,
- Connectivity,
- Visionary leadership,
- Industry, and
- Loss of population.

Participants in the workshop also identified barriers and opportunities.

Obstacles

Major obstacles appear to be:

- **education** in general;
- **social capital**, including lack of trust (or teamwork, cooperation, or collaboration) and racial barriers; and
- **vision**, described variously as the belief that things can be different and better, seeing a way out of poverty, thinking outside the box, positive attitude, direction, good image, and not being resistant to change.

Opportunities

Major Opportunities include:

- **Natural resources;**
- **Sense of community** built around a good location, small town atmosphere, and emerging community leadership; and
- **New opportunities**, including eco-tourism, new markets, technology, micro-enterprise, changes in education, investments in people, distance learning, and the ability to influence what is going on.

Workshop Evaluation

A follow-up evaluation/survey of workshop participants revealed community impressions about the topics offered at the workshop. The topics generally addressed how to create more local wealth and higher paying jobs, and information about the new technology-based economy. Helena participants in the Arkansas workshop viewed the topics in the following way:

Highly Usefulness

- Value-Added
- Clusters and Networks
- Science & Technology
- Venture Finance
- Entrepreneurs
- Social Capital

Average Usefulness

- International Trade
- Traded Sector

Low Usefulness

- Traded Sector
- Workforce
- Time-to-Market

The evaluation/survey also measured the popularity of strategies for technology-based economic development. Helena participants in the Arkansas workshop assessed a list of strategies, as shown below:

Most Popular

- University Tech Transfer
- Industrial Networks

Some Popularity

- Tech Business Incubator
- Research Park

Little Popularity

- Angel Investor Network

Not Rated

- Manufacturing Extension
- Tech-focused Training
- Focused Recruitment

- Entrepreneurial Education
- Community Technology Plan
- Improving K-12

The Community Technology Assessment

The Helena Community Technology Assessment was held June 14, 2000. Sixteen community residents participated. The session began with introductions followed by the TEAM Delta facilitator asking three questions concerning their attitudes about different kinds of investments.

The first question asked participants to assume that they had $100 to spend on the following three things: (a) recruiting businesses to the community, (b) assisting existing business to expand, and (c) helping new, start-up businesses. The $100 could be divided among the three things in any proportion desired. The Helena participants allocated their collective $1600 in roughly equal amounts for start-up companies ($555), existing firms ($535), and recruiting ($510).

The second question asked participants to assume that they had $100 to spend on the following three things: (a) education, training, and human resource development, (b) technology transfer and development, and (c) capital investments. The $100 could be divided among the three things in any proportion desired. The participants allocated their collective $1599 in roughly equal amounts for education ($578) and technology ($568), with less allocated for capital investment ($463).

The third question was whether they agreed or disagreed with the statement that the Internet was changing everything. Fifteen agreed. Several participants added unsolicited comments such as the following, “We have shifted from the industrial and agricultural age into the information age.” Only one person disagreed.

These warm-up questions were followed by discussion and compiling four lists of technology resources.

Discussion about key firms, those adding value, exporting, and paying higher wages, led to the following list: Hoffinger Industry, H&M Lumber Co., agricultural chemical firms (e.g., Norac, Co.), Crowley Ridge Aviation, and river operations.

Discussion about business partners that contribute to the success of key firms generated the following list: banks and investment companies, insurance companies, and one civil engineering firm.

The discussion departed from the expected as the group tackled the list of soft infrastructure resources (e.g., schools, medical clinics, etc.). "I think we are trying to compete by using only half of our resources," one participant began, and launched an honest, hour-long discussion about race and the role it plays in the community's image and economic development activities. Several opportunities for the community evolved from the discussion. Though unplanned, and not directly related to technology, the discussion was the single most important topic discussed. At one point in the discussion about race, the facilitator told the story about Trent Williams' cocktail party conversation with an economist about uneven economic development in post World War II Italy. The conclusion to the story is that the communities that did better economically had more choral societies and football teams, which served as forums for communication and proved to have value that the economist called social capital. Trent elaborates on this by pointing out that this is a new kind of capital. It is based on economic and civic relationships. When a region has social capital, information spreads quickly, accurately, and efficiently. The familiarity creates a foundation of trust and expectation of reciprocity.

The facilitator further observed that a day earlier a resident had indicated that for four days each year the community sets aside its differences for the blues festival. This is a form of social capital.

A Community Profile provided by the Arkansas Community of Excellence program at the Arkansas Department of Economic Development assisted discussion about the hard infrastructure resources of the community. Participants thought that Helena’s traditional infrastructure was substantial. The only future need they identified was telecommunications infrastructure that is needed for future economic development.

The closing question for the group was what they wanted Helena to be known for five years from the date of the assessment. Answers focused on Helena’s people and a prosperous community, with economic opportunities for all, and an outstanding quality of life. Several examples follow; “I want Helena to be known for:

- A stable community with a good quality of life, which includes jobs, educational opportunities and other factors that make people want to live and work in the area.
- A people coming together, who live and work together, making their community better.
- A culturally diverse community with excellent opportunities in education, communications, distribution and agriculture.
- A community in which people in general, feel that they have a stake in and can contribute to making the area and their families prosper.”

A follow-up mail survey was conducted. Participants in the Helena community technology assessment were asked to estimate the “connectivity” among the various organizations they identified among key, firms, business partners, and the community’s soft infrastructure. Their responses indicate their collective opinion that the most interconnected resources in their community are banks, the Helena Medical Center, and insurance companies.

Next Steps

Opportunities include planning further development of the community’s social capital.