



ABOUT CREATE BRIDGES

CREATE BRIDGES, an acronym for **Celebrating Retail, Accommodations, Tourism, and Entertainment by Building Rural Innovations and Developing Growth Economies**, was launched to develop and test a process to promote and strengthen retail, accommodations, tourism, and entertainment sectors, particularly in rural, economically distressed areas.

The Goal

- ◆ **Raise awareness of the role these important businesses play in the region's economy**
- ◆ **Determine challenges and barriers negatively impacting those businesses**
- ◆ **Develop and implement strategies to strengthen the retail, accommodations, tourism and entertainment sectors within a region**

The CREATE BRIDGES pilot process, builds upon Stronger Economies Together, a collaborative effort across 32 states, led by the Southern Rural Development Center (SRDC) at Mississippi State University to help rural counties work together to develop and implement an economic development plan for their multi-county region.

CREATE BRIDGES was initially piloted at universities in three Southern Region states – Kentucky, Arkansas and Oklahoma. New Mexico, North Carolina and Illinois joined the effort in Phase 2 of the multi-year project.



More information about the Southern Rural Development Center at Mississippi State University, CREATE BRIDGES and Stronger Economies Together is available at the following links: <https://srdc.msstate.edu/>; <https://srdc.msstate.edu/programs/create-bridges>; and https://srdc.msstate.edu/set/files/overview_p4_2013.pdf



ABOUT CREATE BRIDGES ILLINOIS

In March of 2020, Illinois Community Economic Development Extension Specialists Susan Odum and Zach Kennedy were invited to join a national team through the SRDC at Mississippi State University.

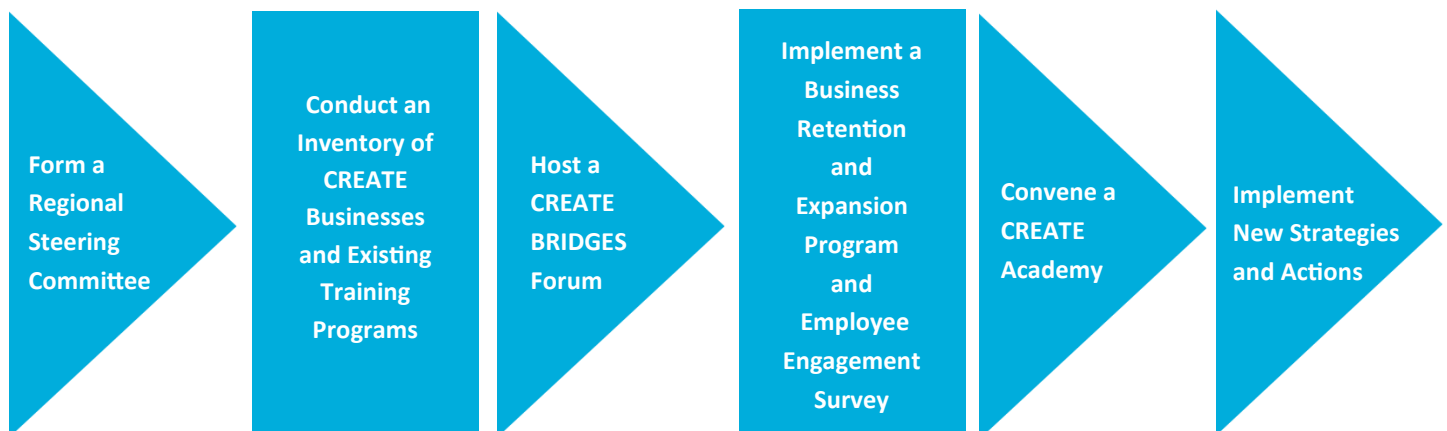
The national team was charged with developing and implementing an innovative process designed to build capacity in rural economically distressed regions to support their retail, accommodations, tourism and entertainment sectors, which provide jobs and business opportunities and frequently play a major role in a region's economic vitality. Given the time frame of the Phase 2 effort, the national team was also charged with examining the impacts of COVID-19 on the CREATE sectors.

As part of the innovative initiative, Illinois Extension received a subaward from the SRDC to pilot the process and implement strategies to build capacity and boost rural economies. The original project period was outlined from March 2020 through November 2022, however, as a result of the global pandemic, the project performance period was extended through December 2023.

In September of 2020, Illinois Extension announced the selection of the Southern Five region counties of Alexander, Johnson, Massac, Pulaski and Union for participation in CREATE BRIDGES. The region is known for its scenic beauty, outdoor recreation, historic sites, state parks, orchards, wineries, restaurants and unique lodging facilities amongst the backdrop of the Shawnee National Forest.



Over the project performance period, the Illinois project team led the Southern Five Region through the CREATE BRIDGES Process:





CREATE BRIDGES Illinois

CREATE BRIDGES serves a vital role for communities.

While manufacturing and professional services are often the focus of economic development efforts, businesses in the retail, accommodations, tourism and entertainment sectors are important to the viability of communities and regions. These industries provide needed goods, services, and amenities to residents and visitors and enhance quality of life. They are often a major source of jobs and tax revenue for communities. Plus, jobs in the sectors often serve as an entry point for new workers. These assessments are particularly true in the Southern Five counties of Illinois.

As a result of the data-driven CREATE BRIDGES process, community members and regional steering committee members came together to identify major themes to support the CREATE Sector businesses and their workforce in the Southern Five counties of Illinois.

The major themes were further defined into strategies, with consideration given to the types of projects that were eligible for funding through the CREATE BRIDGES pilot initiative.

In 2023, CREATE BRIDGES Illinois supported projects in five core strategy areas in the Southern Five counties with funding assistance from the CREATE BRIDGES initiative.



The following pages provide a brief overview of some of the projects that were undertaken in each of the five core strategy areas.



REGIONAL MARKETING AND PROMOTION

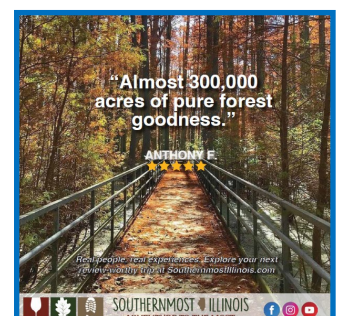
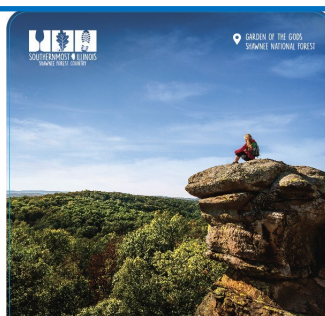
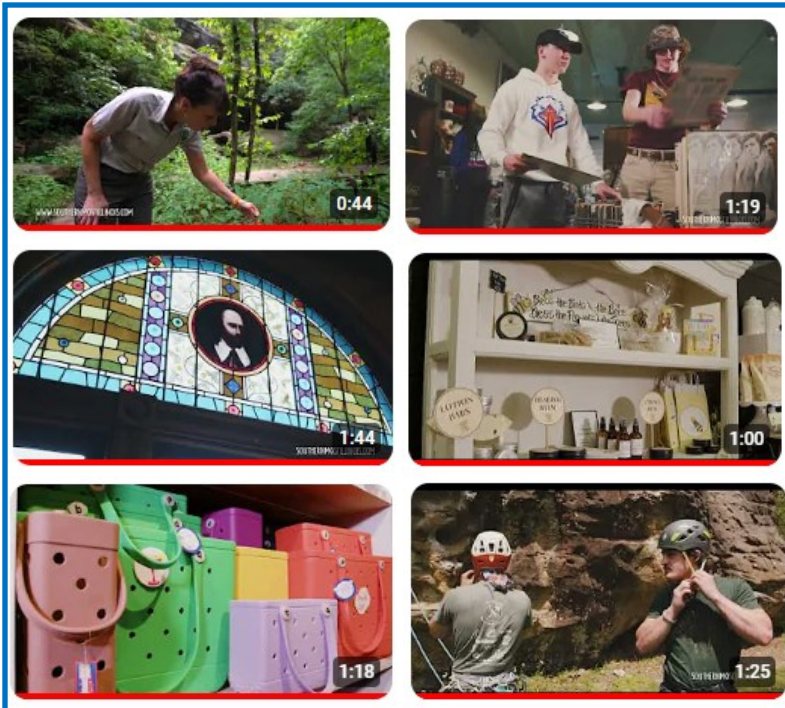
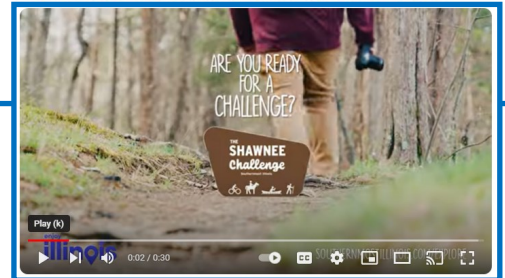
Regional Marketing and Promotion efforts undertaken in cooperation with our regional marketing and promotion partner, Southernmost Illinois Tourism included:

- ✦ Bandwango: The Destination Experience Engine
- ✦ The Shawnee Challenge branding and marketing materials
- ✦ Shawnee Forest Country displays, signage and maps
- ✦ April 8, 2024 Eclipse marketing materials
- ✦ Videography, digital and television marketing campaigns
- ✦ Regional marketing and promotion technical assistance project with faculty and students in the College of Media at University of Illinois



THE SHAWNEE CHALLENGE 2024

- MOBILE EXCLUSIVE
- INSTANTLY DELIVERED VIA TEXT AND EMAIL
- NO APPS TO DOWNLOAD
- COMPLETE THE SHAWNEE CHALLENGE!
- EARN A SHAWNEE CHALLENGE STICKER





BUY LOCAL EDUCATION AND MARKETING

Buy Local Education and Marketing efforts included:

- ◆ Educational programming with youth, young adult and adult audiences
- ◆ A 2022 Downtown Connection Field Trip with 5th grade students at Davie Junior High School in Anna
- ◆ An Eat. Shop. Love. Local. marketing campaign including a canvas shopping bag, stickers & window clings
- ◆ A Shop Local video produced in conjunction with Southernmost Illinois Tourism





CREATIVE PLACEMAKING INITIATIVE

Creative Placemaking efforts included:

- ◆ In 2022, CREATE BRIDGES Illinois sponsored 15 community members in a Harbinger Consultancy webinar series entitled: **Creative Placemaking: Creating Communities We Love Through Arts & Culture, Diverse Partners and Community Spaces**. The course was designed to help participants: identify and leverage overlooked assets; highlight and deepen the community's unique character; integrate arts and culture into planning and community engagement; and engage creativity and local knowledge to make the community a better place to work, play and visit.
- ◆ In 2023, CREATE BRIDGES Illinois supported small community projects that generated a sense of community pride for local residents and helped create public spaces that improved each community's placemaking goals. Projects included:
 - ◆ The Cairo Historical Preservation Project, Inc erected cast iron benches in the City of Cairo at three locations: St Mary's Park; next to the newly erected African American Troops Civil War Monument; and near the flood wall
 - ◆ Revive Vienna completed a signage and landscaping project at the Vienna City Park adjacent to the famous Tunnel Hill State Trail promoting Johnson County as the Bicycling Capital of Illinois
 - ◆ Metropolis Tourism erected new signage to promote Illinois' Super City with partial funding from CREATE BRIDGES
 - ◆ The City of Anna completed a new mural project entitled "Spend Time in Anna" with partial funding from CREATE BRIDGES
 - ◆ The City of Mound City undertook a project to bring new seating options to the community including 2 benches and a picnic table on the levee outlook and a third bench on Main Street near the new bus stop
 - ◆ Regionally, with the help of the Vienna High School Industrial Arts program, the Creative Placemaking Committee ensured more picnic tables were available for people to enjoy





SMALL BUSINESS & WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

Small Business and Workforce Development efforts undertaken in cooperation with our small business and workforce partner, Shawnee Community College, included:

- ✦ ServSafe Manager and Food Handler certifications
- ✦ The Entrepreneurial Edge Expo small business conference
- ✦ Real Colors® Fundamentals Workshops
- ✦ Podcasting Studio Establishment
- ✦ New Radio/Podcasting Class for Students
- ✦ Small Business Networking Events
- ✦ Small Business Workshops
- ✦ LinkedIn Learning



Coming to the

Entrepreneurial EXPO Edge

Topics Includes

- Product Photography
- Headshots at Lunch

Monday, Dec. 4
from 8:30 a.m. to 3:30 p.m.
at **Shawnee Community College**
Register now at shawneecce.edu


Hannah Prendergast
Owner of
Hannah Prendergast
Photography







COMMUNITY CAPACITY BUILDING

Community Capacity Building efforts included:

- ◆ Sponsoring six attendees for the 2023 Rural Community Economic Development Conference in Springfield
- ◆ Hosting the 2023 Reversing the Exodus 2.0 Summit at Shawnee Community College
- ◆ Sponsoring the 2023 One Shawnee Regional Summit at Vienna High School

SAVE THE DATE



**AUGUST 29,
2023**

**SHAWNEE
COMMUNITY
COLLEGE
8:30 AM TO 3:00 PM**

REVERSING THE EXODUS 2.0 SUMMIT

**ALMOST EVERY RURAL
COUNTY HAS EXPERIENCED
AN OUTMIGRATION OF ITS
YOUNGEST AND BRIGHTEST
TALENT**

SPONSORED BY



Illinois Extension
UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS URBANA-CHAMPAIGN

**JOIN US FOR A
DAY- LONG SUMMIT
TO LEARN STRATEGIES
TO REVERSE THE TREND**





Illinois Extension CREATE BRIDGES Project Team



Zach Kennedy
Extension Specialist, State
Community & Economic Development



Susan Odum
Extension Specialist, Region 3
Community & Economic Development



Quin Colson
Researcher
Community & Economic Development

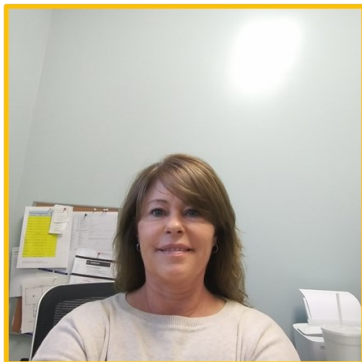
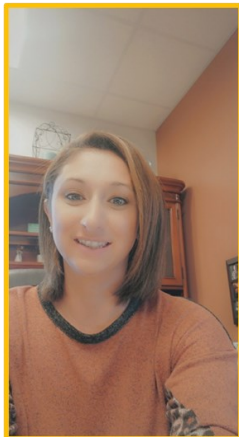
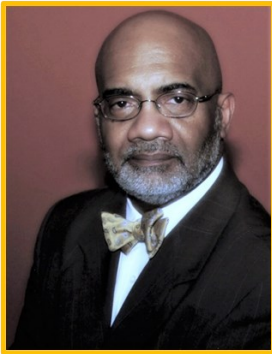


Destenie Sullivan
Research Assistant
Community & Economic Development

Illinois CREATE BRIDGES Regional Partner Organizations



Illinois
Department of Commerce
& Economic Opportunity
JB Pritzker, Governor



Illinois CREATE BRIDGES Regional Steering Committee Members In Action



Regional Steering Committee Members In Action Continued



Regional Marketing and Promotion Impacts

In this experiential learning project with the College of Media at University of Illinois, the students were challenged to identify ways to raise awareness of the Shawnee Forest Country region, implement social channel expansion and outline potential branding and marketing materials to support regional tourism marketing efforts. This hands-on, project-based learning activity also served as an excellent workforce development training as it provided the students with real world experience in regional marketing, branding and promotion.

The student team chose the slogan “Adventure to the Most” for their ad campaign. The students created the ad campaign, a media plan and a proposed budget. After completion of the eight-week course, two students from the team were hired as interns, to bring the campaign to life.

“This CREATE BRIDGES initiative offered a perfect opportunity for collaboration between local government and the university. Our students were excited to research and promote Southern Illinois as a great tourist destination, and to use the skills they've learned in the classroom to create real work with a real purpose. The campaign they created is on par with professional work in terms of strategic direction and creative execution. I'm proud of the work they did and am eager to see this campaign roll out.” - Shachar Meron, Senior Lecturer, Advertising & Brand Strategy, Charles H. Sandage Department of Advertising

“I was able to grow my capabilities by preparing materials, setting deadlines, designating tasks, communicating with the client, and so much more. My team and I sat for multiple sessions trying to find the best route to take and this class really does allow you to feel and see what agency life is like. Southernmost was looking and trusting us to come up with a campaign that would hit their goals, that would resonate with their target audience, and I am happy to say they got just that.” - Kiara Vega, Senior, Advertising Major

“In so many of the advertising classes I have taken, most of them take methods and skills we learn in class and apply them to hypothetical scenarios or made-up clients. ADV 400 and the internship I was offered to continue the project was quite the opposite. It gave me real world experience with a real-life client that had an actual budget for a campaign. This class's sense of real work experience encouraged me to hit deadlines harder, care more about the content I was creating, and overall made me enjoy the work I was doing more, as it allowed me to work in an environment that was close to that of a real-world ad agency. At the end of the course, our group was able to create an ad campaign for Southernmost Illinois Tourism, advertising Shawnee National Forest as a top place to visit in Illinois.” - Joshua Witte, Junior, Advertising Major

“It is great to have fresh eyes review our content and come up with a clean, consistent message to reach outdoor enthusiasts. Working together, the College of Media came up with a relevant way to target the adventure seeking audience with the variety of choices in Southernmost Illinois by featuring different aspects in the ‘Adventure to the Most’ campaign.” - Carol Hoffman, Shawnee Forest Country, Southernmost Illinois Tourism Bureau



“I climbed to the top of beautiful rock formations. The best spot in Illinois for rock climbers young and old.”

MICHAEL D.
★★★★★

Real people, real experiences. Explore your next review-worthy trip at SouthernmostIllinois.com

SOUTHERNMOST ILLINOIS
ADVENTURE TO THE MOST

Facebook Instagram YouTube

Buy Local Education and Marketing Impacts

On September 20, 2022, a group of volunteers including CREATE BRIDGES Illinois Project Team Lead Susan Odum, CREATE BRIDGES Regional Steering Committee Members Dori Bigler and Tanya Loveless and fifth grade teacher Jennifer Osman coordinated the Downtown Connection field trip for the fifth grade students at Davie Junior High School in Anna (photos on page 5). After the field trip to visit with Downtown Anna businesses, Osman stated: “Today was a success! The kids absolutely loved each and every business experience.”

On November 9, 2023, CREATE BRIDGES Illinois Project Team Lead Susan Odum delivered a presentation on the importance of shopping local to the Union County Creating Entrepreneurial Opportunities (CEO) class.

After the presentation Union County CEO Program Facilitator Melanie Smith posted the following to their Facebook page. *“Ms. Susan Odum, Extension Specialist, Community Development, University of Illinois Extension, presented to us this week on the importance of shopping local! Susan is so knowledgeable and has so much experience with our local communities and the impact that spending our money locally first has on our local businesses. Her presentation always makes an impact on the UCCEO team and this year was no different! One of the most thought-provoking activities Susan has us engage in, exemplifies the “multiplier effect” of spending our money locally. Simply put, if we take \$10 and spend it out of Union County, it’s basically GONE from the county. If we take \$10 and spend it at a local business, that business owner or employee is very likely to spend it in another local business. It is estimated that if every dollar spent locally is “passed on” approximately 7 times before leaving the local area, the economic impact would be huge!”* – Melanie Smith, Union County Creating Entrepreneurial Opportunities (CEO) Facilitator

The following is a journal excerpt from a Union County CEO student: *“On Thursday, November 9th, Susan Odum talked with us about shopping local. This presentation was different from others because it was interactive. She taught us that shopping locally is huge in community development. The more money you spend in your community, the more money comes back or “circulates”. This presentation was really eye opening as I never realized how important shopping locally was. My biggest takeaway was the farther away you travel to spend money, the less money is circulated and given back to the community in which you live. This is something that I have never really thought about and something that I will try to consider when buying things.”* – Ryan Libbert, senior at Shawnee High School



A second journal excerpt was outlined as follows: *“Susan Odum is a woman that I will look up to for two reasons: 1) she taught me a very valuable lesson on shopping locally; and 2) she brought us stickers (note: stickers were used in a program activity). The first reason is actually why she is such an amazing woman. Through a small graph, she drew up of a pool, stickers, and a fun game about shopping local, each of us learned about the way money moves in our county. Without our local shops, we would not have any money to circulate. It is difficult to keep money in the county, but if we work hard enough and we keep supporting local businesses, we may be able to keep more money in Union County.”* – Kaylie Adams, senior at Cobden High School

Small Business and Workforce Development Impacts

ServSafe Training From June through December of 2023, our program partner, Shawnee Community College, hosted 8-hour ServSafe Manager training events for CREATE Sector business owners, managers, employees and future employees at locations throughout the five-county region. More than 100 participants took part in the 8-hour trainings, including 70+ CREATE Sector business owners, managers and employees. Other training participants were either seeking knowledge to gain employment in the sector or representing other entities that also require ServSafe Manager certification for their employees.

“Funding for ServSafe training has alleviated a common challenge faced by local businesses and the workforce. In many instances, businesses struggle with the recurring issue of investing in training for employees who depart shortly thereafter. However, thanks to CREATE BRIDGES funding, several small businesses have been able to fully fund ServSafe training for their employees, eliminating the financial burden and contributing to a more skilled and secure workforce.” – Lydia Dover Hess, Director of Small Business and Workforce Development, Shawnee Community College

In the fall of 2023, 15 students at Vienna High School obtained their Food Handler certification with assistance from CREATE BRIDGES. This new certification will assist these students as they embark on first time employment with our CREATE Sector businesses.

Small Business Training On December 4, 2023, CREATE BRIDGES Illinois hosted a full day business conference entitled the *Entrepreneurial Edge Expo* which included breakout sessions on topics including: strategic planning, employee training and development, legal aspects of rental agreements for the wine trail and cabin industries, legal things to consider when starting a business, customer service tips, how to dress like a professional, product photography, and psychological wellness and safety in small business. Lydia Dover Hess, Director of Small Business and Workforce Development at Shawnee Community College, one of our CREATE BRIDGES Regional Co-Chairs, was the primary organizer of the Entrepreneurial Edge Expo event.

During the event, Lisa Thomas who was interested in opening an AirBnb had the opportunity to connect with Tanya Loveless, CREATE BRIDGES Regional Steering Committee member and specialty lodging owner. Following the event, Lisa Thomas provided CREATE BRIDGES with the following quote: *“The Entrepreneurial Edge Expo was an awesome experience. I was able to learn vital information about opening a small business legally. I was also able to connect with a short-term accommodations business owner during the event. She was extremely helpful. I am grateful for this experience.”*

Small Business Networking *“Participating in CREATE BRIDGES sponsored networking events has been so beneficial to my business. I have been able to connect with other businesses in areas I had not thought of before. These types of events are a great asset to Southern Illinois and support of small businesses such as mine.”* - Shelly Pender, owner of Fluttering Bloom Designs, LLC.



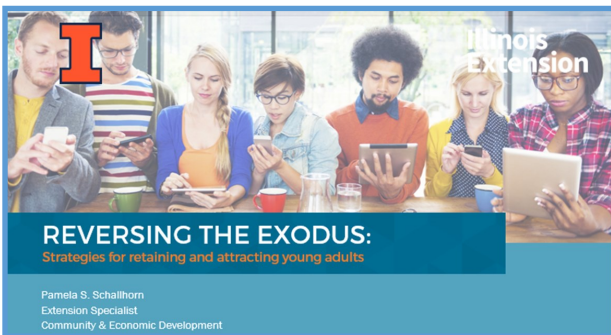
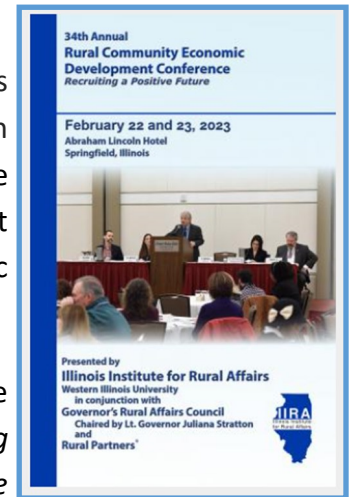


Community Capacity Building Impacts

In February of 2023, CREATE BRIDGES sponsored six (6) community members attendance at the annual Rural Community Economic Development Conference in Springfield, Illinois. The event featured plenary sessions on overcoming the challenges facing rural Illinois and concurrent sessions designed to highlight strategies that work, success stories with outcomes, and community economic development techniques.

Don Patton stated that his rural community faces many challenges, but he was able to glean some helpful advice at the conference. His outcomes included: *“learning how to postulate your community assets by writing a narrative to change the perspective of those who see your town; use of social media to showcase the community’s assets and share stories of the community and its’ people; and networking with others with similar goals to change their communities in a positive way.”* - Don Patton, President, The Cairo Historical Preservation Project, Inc.

Phillip Hosfeldt shared the following takeaways from the conference: *“During my time at the rural development conference, it was incredible that I was able to get time to connect with many of my fellow people in the local region that have the same heart as me for the community. This experience has helped to jumpstart community revitalization efforts in Johnson County again because it provides a common language that those of us that were there the words to convey what we knew we needed to do for our town, but lacked the strategy to accomplish it.”* - Phillip Hosfeldt, Vienna Community Member, Vienna High School Dean of System Programs



In August of 2023, Illinois Extension Community Economic Development (CED) Specialists, Pam Schallhorn, Zach Kennedy and Susan Odum and CED Team Leader Anne Silvis hosted a Reversing the Exodus 2.0 Summit at Shawnee Community College. The event included a data presentation depicting that the region is losing its young adult population, followed by a Reversing the Exodus 2.0 presentation that outlined strategies to attract and retain young adults to rural

southern Illinois. The event also included two panel discussions, one with the region’s tourism professionals designed to increase awareness of the importance of marketing the region’s outdoor amenities and recreational opportunities to attract and retain young adults. The second panel discussion included young adults from throughout southern Illinois that were charged with helping the attendees better understand what young adults are looking for in rural communities.

The following are quotes from two Summit attendees. *“Just wanted to let you know that today’s meeting (The Reversing the Exodus 2.0 Summit) was awesome. I especially liked the young adults’ input. Hope to attend more meetings like this in and around Southern Illinois. Thanks for all you do.”* – Mike Korte, President of the Friends of Fort Massac, Metropolis Tourism Bureau Board Member and *“Yesterday (The Reversing the Exodus 2.0 Summit) was filled with great presenters and good information.”* – Dori Bigler, City Administrator, City of Anna