ForumJournal

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Heritage-Based Rural Development

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Forum
NATIONAL TRUST FOR HISTORIC PRESERVATION

Protecting Our Rural Heritage

SENATOR BLANCHE LINCOLN

As a seventh-generation Arkansan and a native of Helena, I have always valued the culture and heritage of my state. Eastern Arkansas, in particular, is near and dear to my heart.

I grew up within walking distance of both sets of grandparents and neighbors who were willing to lend a helping hand when times were tough. As a young girl, I didn't realize how much these experiences would influence the person I have become. Rural America's strength lies in these types of experiences. They are important fibers in the fabric of who we are. But unfortunately, they are rarely repeated in today's world, for today's generation.

I believe it's critically important that we preserve our history and develop venues where both visitors to Arkansas and natives of our state can learn about past generations and cultures.

The recent work of the National Trust for Historic Preservation and its state and local partners has shown how our rural heritage not only lives in our memories—it is also an asset to build upon for our future. Preserving our rural heritage is a strategy to achieve sustainable development and create jobs in rural areas.

In my role as a United States Senator, I believe it is critical to help provide resources and assistance for rural community development and job creation. In the last Congress, I sponsored a bill to improve the historic rehabilitation tax credit—the nation's largest federal incentive to promote the sustainable development of America's historic rural and urban buildings and places.

PRESERVING OUR RURAL HERITAGE is a strategy to achieve sustainable development and create jobs in rural areas.

I reintroduced this measure with Senator Olympia Snowe of Maine three months ago because Arkansas has many cities and towns where underutilized historic buildings can have a greater role in spurring neighborhood reinvestment and in addressing the shortage of rural affordable housing.

Through the Community Restoration and Revitalization Act, I want to make sure that our citizens benefit from the tax credit's job-creation and economic development potential. Many job opportunities can be created through trade and manufacturing related to retrofitting and rehabilitating historic buildings.

The bipartisan Community Restoration and Revitalization Act will promote greater investment in commercial projects,

Built in 1912, the former Missouri Pacific train depot in Helena, Ark., was adaptively used to create an interpretive museum.

PHOTO BY JAMES LINDBERG

Senator Blanche Lincoln of Arkansas talks with constituents during Fourth of July celebration in a local barbeque restaurant.

PHOTO COURTESY OF THE OFFICE OF SENATOR BLANCHE LINCOLN

particularly for Main Street businesses located in small towns and older neighborhoods where there is a critical need for investment and revitalization. Since it was first enacted in 1976, the Historic Rehabilitation Tax Credit has generated more than $50 billion in renovation and revitalization, and created thousands of jobs across the country.

As chairman of the Senate Agriculture Committee, I know that strategic federal programs can support and spark private initiatives and partnerships, ranging from innovative food production to renewable energy to sustainable rural development.

The National Trust for Historic Preservation's recent pilot projects in rural regions of Arkansas and Kentucky have shown the promise of implementing a "heritage-based" approach to economic and community development in rural regions. These two regions were selected to receive assistance from the National Trust, with funding provided by the W. K. Kellogg Foundation. Each of these areas uses a regional approach to rural economic development that builds on geographic, historic, economic, and cultural ties. Heritage-based rural development includes strategies such as conserving historic structures and landscapes, heritage tourism, entrepreneurial and small business development, education, and regional branding and marketing.

As an Arkansas native, I am particularly familiar with and proud of the work that is underway in the Arkansas Delta region, in collaboration with the Arkansas Delta Byways regional tourism promotion association and Dr. Ruth Hawkins

at Arkansas State University. Employing heritage tourism as a key economic development strategy has proven successful at attracting visitors, dollars, and additional related investments in small towns and rural communities across the region—for example, the development of an Arkansas Delta Music Trail, www.deltabyways.com; the Southern Tenant Farmers Museum in Tyronza, http://stfm.astate.edu; and the Hemingway-Pfeiffer Museum and Educational Center in Piggott, http://hemingway.astate.edu. Through initiatives such as Arkansas DeltaMade, www.arkansasdeltamade.com, this program is also supporting entrepreneurs and growing local businesses in the region.

Similar work is underway in the central Kentucky region, where the National Trust has been working with state and local partners. The work in these regions is demonstrating that you don't have to sacrifice your heritage and unique flavor to achieve rural economic and community development.

This is an important time for rural communities. Many creative people and organizations are working hard to build stronger, more sustainable rural economies. The federal government can play a role in supporting these efforts, by removing barriers and providing incentives.

I am pleased to know that preservation advocates around the country are working hard to preserve our nation's rural heritage and helping to foster sustainable rural economic development. I look forward to working together with you. **FJ**

U.S. SENATOR BLANCHE LINCOLN became the first Arkansan to serve as Chairman of the U.S. Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry in September of 2009. As Chairman, she provides Arkansans a strong voice in Washington on issues important to rural communities.

More than a dozen new businesses have opened in Main Street communities since the launch of the Arkansas Delta Made program, which markets and supports entrepreneurs who feature products from the 15-county Arkansas Delta region.

PHOTO BY JAMES LINDBERG