

# **A Vision for Clarke County's Future**

A Strategic Plan for Clarke County

A cooperative effort between the Clarke County Board of Supervisors,  
the Clarke County Chamber of Commerce, and the citizens of Clarke County.

Facilitated by The Montgomery Institute

Support provided by Mid-Mississippi Development District, Mississippi Power Company,  
East Mississippi Electric Power Association, Jones County Junior College, Mississippi Development  
Authority, and the John C. Stennis Institute of Government at Mississippi State University.

August 2002

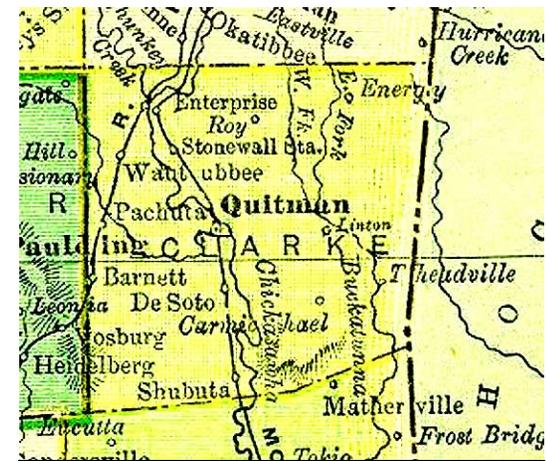
## INTRODUCTION

A Vision for Clarke County's Future resulted from a strong desire by the people of Clarke County to take charge of their own destiny. Major plant closures had severely impacted the local economy with unemployment rising to 19.9%. A story in the Jackson Clarion-Ledger by Clarke County native Scott Waller described the economic situation like this:

The county had a bustling economy, fueled mainly by the textile industry. All of the jobs that existed in that industry in the early 1990s are now gone. Two of the county's major employers, Burlington Industries in Stonewall and Nazareth/Century Mills in Quitman, have turned out the lights — "cause the party's over...." The knitting mill, which employed over 900 people in 1990, ceased to exist on May 31. Same goes for Burlington. The North Carolina-based company took over the Stonewall cotton mill in 1962. It filed for bankruptcy last November. The doors were closed in April — 816 jobs were lost. It has been especially painful to watch the transition in Clarke County. Empty factories are scattered from one end of the county to the other. And it hasn't just been jobs in the textile industry. A building near Shubuta, which was a division of Sunbeam-Oster Co., sits empty. The scales plant closed in 1997, resulting in the loss of 250 jobs. Storefronts of once profitable businesses are vacant.

Clarke County is a rural county in East Mississippi with a population of 17,995. The county has five small municipalities. Quitman, the county seat, has a population of 2,463. Stonewall has 1,149 residents, Shubuta 651, Enterprise 474, and Pachuta 245. Over 70% of the county's population lives outside the municipalities. Small villages and homesteads dot the rolling countryside.

Clarke County and nature are synonymous with the productivity and recreation of this beautiful area in the heartland of the plains of East Central Mississippi. Centered in the once great Choctaw Indian nation, this area was ceded to the United States in 1820 by the Treaty of Dancing Rabbit Creek. Clarke County was named in honor of the first chancellor of the State of Mississippi, Joshua G. Clarke. Since its official beginning, December 23, 1833, Clarke County has been prominent in agriculture and natural resources. The county is rich in history, having survived the ravages of Sherman and his troops during the latter stages of the Civil War. The construction of railroads had an impact on the county by providing rail transportation from Mobile, Alabama in the south to the Ohio River in the north. Today, two railroads, an Interstate Highway, and a new four-lane highway traverse the county.



Clarke County Map from 1895

## THE STRATEGIC PLANNING PROCESS

The Clarke County strategic planning process grew from ideas of its citizens and was supported and nurtured by the Clarke County Board of Supervisors and the Clarke County Chamber of Commerce. The effort created an opportunity for citizens in Clarke County to enhance the capacity of the community, create a vision for the future, and map the path to realize that vision.

The planning process asked people to work together to learn about their communities and county, to define issues facing them, and to determine solutions. Meetings were held in Quitman, Stonewall, Enterprise, Shubuta, Pachuta, Energy and Carmichael. Bill Crawford of The Montgomery Institute facilitated and coordinated the process. This process considers community development based upon six building blocks.

These building blocks are:

Jobs and Business  
Development

Build the economic base and create larger numbers of higher quality jobs.

People and  
Education

Improve schools and training opportunities to create a high-skill, high-value workforce.

Physical  
Infrastructure

The physical components necessary for the community to function – utilities, transportation systems, and communications.

Social  
Infrastructure

Ensure strong human and social services to support working people, families and those in need.

Civic  
Infrastructure

Build a forward looking, accountable and inclusive culture of civic decision-making and problem solving.

Culture, Environment,  
and Recreation.

Preserve and enhance the natural, cultural, historic, recreational and built environment.



## COMMUNITY ASSESSMENT

At its first meeting on Valentine's Day, the participants in the planning process identified their wish list for Clarke County and obstacles they thought may hinder progress.

### WISHES

- Improved quality of life for citizens
- Better educated public
- More economic development for Clarke County
- Two to three industries that are more diverse
- No textiles in Burlington site
- Prosperity and growth
- More job opportunities
- More improved economic development
- Better cooperation in getting jobs
- Assistance for those who lost job so that they don't leave the county
- Training for unemployed
- Greater opportunity for Clarke
- Would like to see a nice restaurant located in Clarke County where people could entertain clients and socialize.
- Locate long-term business
- Recruit new businesses
- Would like to see decreased unemployment
- Wish for knowledge of what to do
- Unity among citizens working for the betterment of Clarke County
- For all people to find employment. Then find some type of industry for Clarke County, maybe several small industries if necessary.
- For Clarke County to be a place families want to move to
- Unity of purpose for all Clarke County residents as we seek to overcome our economic problems and plan for a better quality of life for all.
- Get unemployment rate back down to 2%
- Good paying jobs



- Immediately attract 2-3 medium sized prospects (100-250 employee capacity) in diverse industries or service sector. (We have for too long put all eggs in one basket).
- More retail business
- Attract a buyer for Burlington plant – Not textiles.
- Sense of direction, with pride and purpose
- Wish for Clarke County to become a place where our children can continue to live and be successful.

## OBSTACLES

- Education level of general public is not where it should be
- Economy and a lack of knowledge of how to deal with the situation
- People don't know about Clarke County
- Marketing of County
- Competition from other communities/competing for the same jobs.
- Work together for betterment of the county (Unity).
- Basic attitude of openness to outsiders - Negativity
- Lack of direction
- Better workforce
- Unskilled labor force
- Recruitment
- Lack of growth in county. (Need for industry)
- Feeling of hopelessness
- Perception of being rural area
- Youth leaving county
- Lack of courage
- Unity of governments
- "Nay Sayers"
- Close proximity to Meridian
- Many other communities simultaneously struggling for survival therefore diffusing available resources
- Lack of support from fellow Clarke Countians
- Obstacle of getting the message out of what Clarke has to offer.
- Old attitudes and agendas: Lack of courage
- People moving out of county
- Perceived to be a rural area unable to meet the needs of most large companies

- Lack of interest on the part of all citizens of Clarke County. Need more unity.
- Lack of effort

A common phenomenon in community development is to gather together local folk to discuss a problem and ask them to come up with solutions. Highly successful community developer Harry Martin of Tupelo calls this “pooling our ignorance.” He likes to paraphrase Albert Einstein, saying that the thinking got you into trouble is unlikely to get you out of trouble.

Rather than meeting to “pool your ignorance,” Clarke County citizens heard from experts in many areas: Dr. Judy Phillips of the Stennis Institute of Government at MSU; Mitch Stennett, president of the Economic Development Authority of Jones County; Rusty McMillan, director of the Mid-Mississippi Development District; Harry Martin, president emeritus of the Community Development Foundation of Tupelo; Dr. Charles Harrison, executive director of the University of Mississippi Advanced Learning Center in Tupelo; and Dr. Margaret Morrison, Region VI Health Officer.

Here are some of key points identified in these sessions:

#### JOBS AND BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT

1. You have to have a focus, a plan, and work at it all the time.
2. You must know what your economic capacity is – someone must understand the data and understand the dynamics of your economy.
3. Do your homework – do it yourself. Send out SWAT teams to inventory business and industry in similar size communities to yours.
4. Build your plan based on your homework, make sure everyone buys into it, and stick with it – you’ve got to have staying power.
5. It is hard to market very large buildings, such as the Burlington properties.
6. The ideal marketable facility has about 50,000 to 100,000 square feet of space.
7. Retention and expansion of existing industries should be a top priority.
8. Low taxes and low cost of living, along with local medical facilities, make Clarke County an ideal location for low to moderate income retirees – few communities target these groups.



## PHYSICAL INFRASTRUCTURE

9. Where should you best allocate resources to develop new industrial properties? Mitch Stennett recommended between Hwy 11 and I-59.
10. Industrial prospects prefer sites located near the Interstate versus Highway 45
11. It is expensive to develop industrial properties and they must be provided to prospects at little cost (Mitch Stennett said the development costs should be viewed as investments in jobs by the county or city developing the sites).

## EDUCATION AND WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

12. The competition is not next door, it's the whole world...your students and workers have to compete with Koreans, Taiwanese, Danes and South Africans.
13. People will move to where there are good schools.
14. Clarke County citizens must decide how much they care about their workforce and their schools – what will you settle for?
15. A trained and trainable workforce is essential for industrial development.
16. When I (Charles Harrison) look at the numbers for Clarke County, you have got the opportunity to do really well.
17. Experience shows that the average Mississippian can compete academically or skill-wise if you really want them too – but you have to expect and provide opportunities for excellence.
18. You don't need to know everything...you need to bring in the best minds and use their knowledge to help you.
19. To achieve excellence:
  - a. Eliminate “bottom quartile” performance on standardized tests (they got down to just 1% scoring in the bottom quartile.
  - b. Help teachers be better teachers by keeping them in the classroom teaching (not out doing other things) and make them teach what matters most.
  - c. Hire good teachers and keep them.
  - d. Set high expectations.
  - e. Stand behind good people – help them get the resources they need.

## CIVIC INFRASTRUCTURE

20. Improve communications and collaboration throughout the county.
21. Develop the ability to make prudent, pragmatic decisions.
22. Strengthen both hope and realism for leaders and people of Clarke County. (It is important to provide hope for recovery and a better future, but this hope must be grounded in reality. Otherwise, the hope created will turn to cynicism and anger when it is not realized. By having so many participate in the planning process and by having it “open” you have started down the narrow road that allows you to accomplish both hope and realism.)

## SOCIAL INFRASTRUCTURE

23. There is a need for low-income housing in the county. (Development of such housing could be an economic opportunity; federal grants can be attracted to support such development and, if, local contractors did the work all the funds would benefit Clarke County – Dr. Judy Phillips).
24. Some group in the county really needs to focus on children and think about services for children.
25. Stopping teen pregnancy is one of the most valuable things we can do in a community.
26. Serious wellness efforts can be a benefit in Clarke County.

## CULTURE, ENVIRONMENT AND RECREATION

27. Clarke County's dominant cultural characteristic is faith as evidenced by its churches.
28. Clarke County has many outdoor and recreational assets.

At each of the planning sessions, participants delved further into the strengths and weaknesses of the county and its communities. From the strengths and weaknesses identified, participants then wrote current situation statements for each of the building blocks. A current situation statement describes things as they are now. Here are samples of the current situation statements they wrote:

### Jobs and Business Development

Strengths include our existing businesses that have potential to grow. We have a trainable workforce. We have vo-tech training in our schools. We have low taxes and a hospital providing good health care. However, we are resistant to change. We have trouble finding investors to come to our county. We need for some to have more higher education. And, we need affordable and available property to develop.

### People and Education

In Clarke County, our basic education is good. We have a highly skilled workforce with transferable work skills, a high percentage of high school graduates and a strong relationship between the Board of Supervisors and the Boards of Education. Our areas to improve include more participation of young people in programs and a need to make education and community



involvement a priority among/within families. Parents and community leaders need more involvement in the education/training process. We feel that Jones County Junior College is an asset but its location is a difficulty for some.

#### Physical Infrastructure

In Clarke County we have available land, buildings, adequate power, water, gas and sewage. We are close in proximity to an interstate, 4-lane highway, major rail and airports. However, the industrial sites are not developed and some buildings would be hard to market. Flood zones and wetlands could be a problem for future industrial sites as could inadequate telecommunications and limited available housing.

#### Social Infrastructure

We feel that the county suffers in areas of social infrastructure due to too many latch-key situations, not enough people taking advantage of programs that could improve lifestyles; throwing money at problems instead of people changing behavior, and too many people with low self-esteem and expectations. We have too many people that accept the status quo and expect others to solve problems. Poverty begets poverty. However, the county has a good hospital, Department of Human Services, and Health Department. We also have excellent Head Start program along with a Boys & Girls Club. Area churches offer summer programs, Quitman schools offer family liaison, and children have the opportunity for free and reduced lunches. Excellent library programs are available.

#### Civic Infrastructure

We have a lack of leadership and need a main contact person for the county. Our efforts lack continuity. There is turf grabbing among the different communities and organizations and a resistance to change. There is a lack of concern – complacency. We have a core group of people willing to make changes and that have a vision. We have five municipalities that have expressed a desire to work together. We have local media that are willing to help. We have a Chamber that wants to make a difference.

#### Culture, Environment and Recreation

Clarke County has a rich history and strong cultural traditions. We have a pristine environment (except for some litter) and good recreational facilities and opportunities. These include: Faith and Churches; Woman's Club—Civic Clubs; Schools—Sports/Music; Volunteer Fire Departments & Events; Regional Library; Baseball/Soccer/Softball; Arts in the Park; Festivals Charitable Activities; Extended Family; Sports (organized); Outdoor Activities; Clarkco—camping/canoeing; Rivers/Lakes/hunting/fishing; Ethnic diversity in community; Community identity; Slow pace of life; Hospitable; Rural/Complacent; Local Artists; Public Recreation Complexes; 18-Hole Golf Course; Fish camps; Dunns Falls/Chickasaw River; Confederate Cemetery/history; Langsdale; Antebellum Homes/Churches; Depot; Indian burial/Fossils; Erwin Mills

Building; Race track/Bluegrass Festival; Horse Shows; Car and Cycle Clubs/Shows; Livestock—4-H; Petting Zoo; River Walk; Fox pins; Cook-outs; Gardening.

On May 9, planning participants gathered at ClarkCo State Park to review what they had learned and set goals. The challenge was to set realistic, attainable goals with measurable outcomes. Measurable outcomes are necessary to know if you are making progress or not. Participants divided into groups and wrote two or more goal statements for each building block. Twenty-six (26) goal statements were developed and posted on the walls. Each participant was given three votes to pick the most important goal statements. After two rounds of voting, 10 goal statements were selected. The total was kept to a reasonable number to minimize resource and effort dispersion.

The participants then selected task force leaders for the goals within each building block. Next, they self-assigned themselves to one or more task forces. Task force chairs were encouraged to draw in additional citizens to accomplish their goals.



## **CLARKE COUNTY GOAL STATEMENTS**

### Jobs and Business Development -- Tom Lord, Chair

Goal: We will develop an aggressive business retention and expansion program for implementation during 2003.

Goal: We will increase jobs, restoring the number of jobs lost from the closing of Burlington and Nazareth Mills by June 30, 2004.

### Education and Workforce – Fred Truesdale, Chair

Goal: The reading scores of our third grade students will improve to 15% above the Mississippi average by the end of the 2004 school year.

Goal: We will increase annually the number of citizens who successfully complete GED requirements and at least a one-year technical/vocational pro

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Goal: We will develop a comprehensive plan to address children's issues for implementation during 2003.



### Physical Infrastructure -- Paul Mosley, Chair

Goal: We will develop a five-year, comprehensive master plan for industrial sites and supporting infrastructure for implementation during 2003.

### Social Infrastructure -- Helen Ann Beeman, Chair

Goal: We will develop a comprehensive plan to address children's issues for implementation during 2003.

Civic Infrastructure -- Kay Rolison, Chair

Goal: We will create unity and a can-do attitude among our citizens throughout the county. Success will be measured by the level of participation in planning group activities over the next two years.

Goal: Great communities have a great story. By 2003, we will develop our “story” with a vision to unify the county. Success will be measured through a professional survey.

Goal: We will establish an effective Council of Governments, including local and county officials as well as school and civic leaders. Success will be measured by the level of members’ participation.

Culture, Environment and Recreation -- Leigh Moore, Chair

Goal: We will establish a “LITTER FREE IN ‘03” campaign.