

Helena-West Helena, Arkansas

Severe economic decline leads civic leaders from two small communities in the Mississippi Delta to set aside historic rivalries and work together to save their towns. This story is about an inclusive community-wide planning and implementation process to bridge economic development, housing, education, leadership development and health care.

	Helena-West Helena
Population (2000)	15,000 (in consolidated city)
Municipal budget (2006)	\$9 million ⁸⁰
Per capita income (2000)	\$12,000
Median household income (2000)	\$18,700
Poverty rate (2000)	33%
Minority population (2000)	60%
Proximity to urban center	65 miles from Memphis, Tenn.
Proximity to interstate highway	50 miles
Strategic approach	Strategic planning Partnership development
Time frame	2003–2006

Once thriving with agricultural trade and industrial production, small towns in the Mississippi Delta have since become some of the poorest and most disinvested places in the country. Helena-West Helena in Phillips County is no exception. With a 30 percent poverty rate and a rapidly declining population, this small town has mostly been left behind by the nation's economic transition.

According to Joe Black, a bank vice president in Helena, "In 2003, Phillips County hit the bottom." In response to hitting the bottom, the community in and around Helena came together to initiate the Delta Bridge project. Delta Bridge brings all organizations working on community and economic development projects in Phillips County under a single umbrella. It integrates local development efforts with state, regional and national programs for the Delta and involves substantial contribution from residents of rural Phillips County communities. The strategic plan for Phillips County, which was completed in 2003 and serves as the blueprint for Delta Bridge, includes workable plans of action in the five fundamental pillars of community life: economic development, housing, education, leadership development and health care.

The community and its history

In 2005, sister cities Helena and West Helena became a single, consolidated town, now referred to as Helena-West Helena. Before

⁸⁰ Interview with Michael Boone, city treasurer, October 10, 2006.

consolidation, Helena (population 6,300) was an old river town located on the banks of the Mississippi River with an historic main street and a deep cultural history in blues music and Civil War heritage. West Helena (population 8,600), separated from Helena by six miles of rolling hills, was the commercial sister to Helena, with strip malls, big-box retailers and several manufacturing facilities. After decades of bitter rivalry and dispute, local residents of these two towns voted to merge into a single town.⁸¹ The merger of Helena and West Helena was a watershed event that symbolizes the community's commitment to moving beyond its troubled past.

Helena today is a small town full of contrasts. Most striking are the large, historic Victorian mansions lining a hillside that overlooks neighborhoods of shanty housing. While certain sections of Main Street are making a comeback, most of the turn-of-the-century downtown is vacant, boarded-up and collapsing. West Helena, by contrast, with its many fast-food restaurants, gas stations and grocery stores, could be Anytown, U.S.A.

Although contrasts abound, one thing is certain: Helena is poor. In fact, it is the county seat for one of the poorest counties in Arkansas, with a poverty rate of 30 percent and an unemployment rate approaching 15 percent. Phillips County ranks last in the state in virtually every indicator of economic and social well-being. Nearly 40 percent of its residents lack high-school degrees, and the county leads the nation in births to unwed mothers. A majority of its wealthy residents left town long ago. Indeed, between 1965 and 2005, Phillips County lost 40 percent of its population. These economic and social challenges are rooted in a culture of mistrust across racial lines and unaccountable local government.

Although modern-day Helena struggles to find her place in the new global economy, the town was once the center of a thriving commercial region. In fact, at the turn of the 19th century, Helena was one of Arkansas' most prosperous cities. The town's location – as a port on the Mississippi River surrounded by miles of fertile delta soil – made cotton production a lucrative business. In 1883, Mark Twain described the town in *Life on the Mississippi*: "Helena has a large lumber and grain commerce; has a foundry; oil mills, machine shops and wagon factories – in brief has \$1,000,000 invested in manufacturing industries. She has two railways, and is the commercial center of a broad and prosperous region."⁸²

In addition to its agricultural and manufacturing past, the blues – which grew out of the Mississippi Delta region – turned Helena into a musical mecca 65 years ago. It all began in 1941 when a Helena radio station began broadcasting the King Biscuit Time radio show. Two blues singers put on this daily live program from a radio station downtown. The program was an instant hit that became world renowned among blues aficionados. In 1986, Helena's Main Street program also put on the first King Biscuit Blues Festival, intended to draw visitors and

⁸¹ For the remainder of this report, Helena will refer to the consolidated city of Helena-West Helena.

⁸² Twain, Mark. *Life on the Mississippi*. Boston: James R. Osgood and Co., 1883

rekindle enthusiasm for downtown Helena. Now an annual fall event, this festival draws an international crowd for a three-day weekend, during which small-town Helena more than quadruples in population.

Even though Helena's history is rich with culture and tradition, the town has struggled to recover from persistent economic challenges, including agricultural mechanization, reduced Mississippi River port traffic and manufacturing job loss. In addition, as a small town with an economy built on the exploitation of slave and share-cropping labor – one in which the land was owned by whites and worked by blacks – race relations have always been central. According to one local development expert, Helena “represents a staggering economic development challenge.” Ever since the Johnson Administration initiated Community Action Programs in 1964, Helena has been promised help from the outside through all sorts of development endeavors, but very little has actually happened.⁸³

In early 2003, when the Delta Bridge Project was conceived, the city of Helena was broke and members of the city council in West Helena were under indictment for robbing the city of public funds. West Helena was suing Helena for \$80,000 in overdue landfill fees, and the state had been forced to take over public schools in Phillips County because of their failure to educate the county's children. Helena had hit rock bottom, and something had to change.

The strategy

Helena's strategy, the Delta Bridge Project, is a countywide, comprehensive, intensive and long-term effort to bring all community- and economic-development entities under a single umbrella and to make each one accountable to a locally representative steering committee. As a process-driven strategy, Delta Bridge strives to break the silos that normally divide development activities, including those in the areas of economic development, housing, education, leadership development and health care. This strategy integrates and coordinates local resources and links local efforts to state, regional, federal and philanthropic resources that are dedicated to the Delta region. Funding decisions for community- and economic-development projects are approved or denied by the local committee. Ultimately, the project aims to transform Helena into an economic hub community for the Delta region of eastern Arkansas and western Mississippi.

The project was initiated by Southern Financial Partners and the Walton Family Foundation. Southern is a nonprofit community-development organization affiliated with Southern Development Bancorp, the largest and most profitable rural development bank in the United States. As a development lender and technical assistance provider, this highly respected local organization has a certain amount of clout in and around Phillips County. Delta Bridge grew out of recognition by the leadership at Southern that the existing development strategy for Phillips

⁸³ Interview with Joe Black, Southern Financial Partners, October 11, 2006.

County was not working. Substantial investments were being made across the county, but quality-of-life indicators continued to spiral downward. In response, Southern and the Walton Family Foundation came together to pilot this new strategy.

The first step in Delta Bridge was to complete a baseline study of the county's economy, evaluate past development efforts and create an asset map of the region's social, civic and economic infrastructure. Over 8,000 hours were invested in this initial effort, which led Southern and Walton to determine that Phillips County had a sufficient base of assets and population on which to build. The next step was to initiate a community strategic-planning process. Over an 18-month period in 2003–2004, 300 residents participated in over 500 meetings to develop the strategic community plan for Phillips County.

The plan, ratified in January 2005, includes 46 strategic goals (e.g., expand the Delta Arkansas Health Education Center (AHEC) to allow for greater impact and improved health education and awareness) and over 200 action steps (e.g., expand physical facilities for the Delta AHEC from 4,000 square feet to at least 25,000 square feet by working with the Helena Health Foundation). It has become the blueprint for Delta Bridge. In terms of community strategic plans, the Phillips County plan is not unique in its content. What makes the project stand out is the implementation process. This is Delta Bridge.

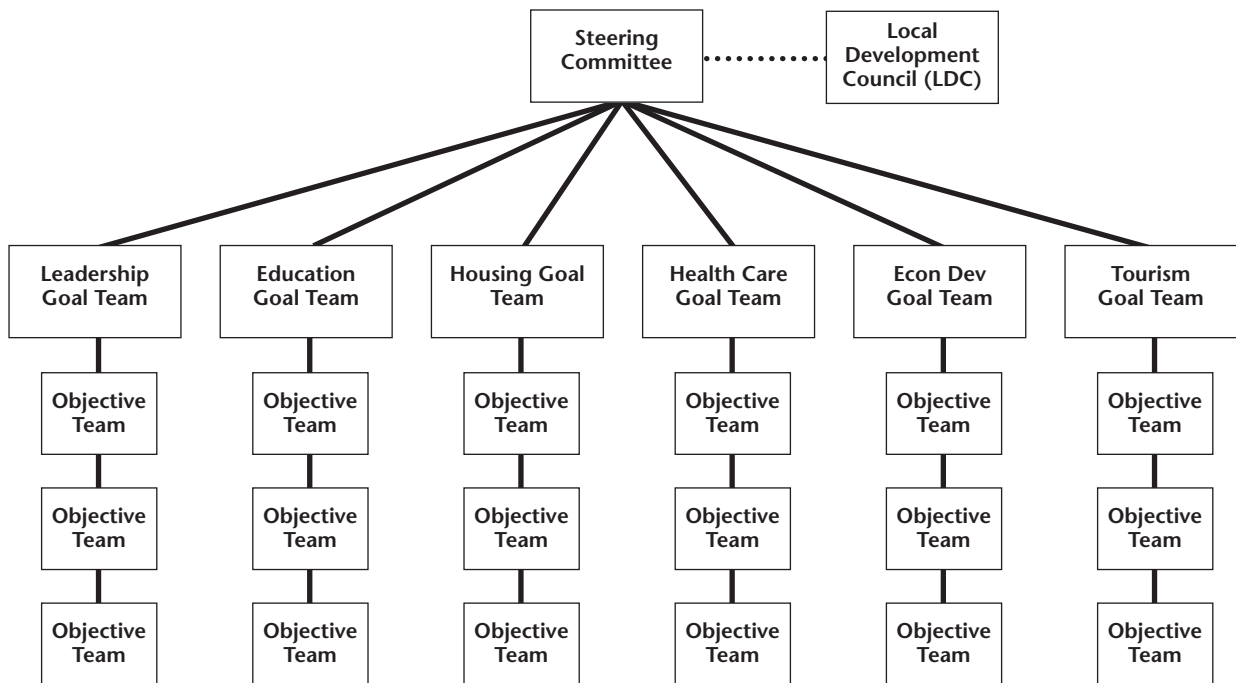
The organizational structure for Delta Bridge includes three levels of decision-making with a separate funding entity. Goals in the strategic plan are divided into five categories, or pillars: economic development (subdivided into traditional economic development and tourism), education, leadership, housing and health care. Each pillar is represented by a "goal team." Goal teams must be representative of the community in terms of race and gender and are led by volunteers (typically folks involved in development work around the county). For example, the Main Street director leads the tourism goal team. Working under the goal teams, "objective teams" represent each action step and are established for a specific purpose: to identify organizations in and around Helena that are capable of implementing a specific action step, help the organization(s) draft a proposal for consideration by the goal team, and see to it that the action step is implemented. Objective teams disband after completing an action step. Goal teams are permanent with rotating leadership.

Goal teams report to the Delta Bridge steering committee, which oversees the project and represents it to the general public. The steering committee is made up of 12 volunteers from across the county, including an elected official, school superintendent, hospital president, community foundation president, extension agent and others. It is chaired by the chancellor from the community college and staffed by Southern Financial Partners. Through monthly meetings, the steering committee approves modifications or additions to the strategic plan and ensures that the plan is updated annually. In addition, the steering committee is responsible for

helping to create partnerships between community organizations and cross-pollinating efforts that cut across different goal teams. For example, during the initiative to expand the area's local AHEC, the steering committee helped to coordinate efforts underway in the health care, economic development and education goal teams.

Finally, the Local Development Council (LDC) is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization that acts as the initial approving organization for all funding activity. The LDC includes seven volunteer members chosen by the steering committee for their expertise in various facets of community and economic development, including bankers, lawyers and regulatory experts. Goal teams submit project proposals to the LDC (through the steering committee), which ensures that each proposal accomplishes a specific action step from the plan. Proposals approved by the LDC are forwarded to Walton and Southern for funding. Walton retains the final authority with respect to grant requests from the family foundation, but Southern has committed to fund (or to find funding for) any proposal that clears the LDC. By creation, the steering committee and LDC are locally representative institutions to which development organizations in Helena are accountable.

Delta Bridge Organizational Chart



In terms of implementation, as of October 2006, 36 strategic goals from the plan are at some level of implementation, and 98 action steps have been completed or are in the process of implementation. The Delta Bridge project is driving development in Helena.

The outcomes

Outcomes that can be attributed to the Delta Bridge project include:

- Funding of a pre-feasibility study for a biodiesel facility in Helena. The facility became the largest investment in Phillips County in more than 25 years. Initial estimates predict the creation of 50 to 60 jobs.
- Developing a plan and funding for a sweet potato storage and distribution facility that will allow local farmers to supply distributors and grocery stores throughout the year.
- Expanding the Delta AHEC from 4,000 square feet to 25,000 square feet, including a community exercise facility.
- Funding start-up costs for the first fixed-route public transportation system in Helena in 10 years. One major objective is to link residents to health care facilities. Riders will pay \$1 per ride, and the system is projected to be self-sustaining after 18 months.
- Expanding the local KIPP (Knowledge is Power Program) School from middle school (grades 5–8) through high school (grades 9–12).
- Increasing affordable housing with the Southern Place Apartments, which will give residents an alternative to the town's rundown properties and encourage other owners to clean up.

- Funding construction and operation of a new Boys and Girls Club in downtown Helena, which is projected to attract 400 to 500 kids from across the county.
- Increasing cooperation in an effort to lobby for a four-lane highway bypass to route traffic around Memphis, which would substantially increase traffic into Helena.
- Renewing optimism and hope among local residents and energizing civic engagement. This year, both the chamber and the Main Street program had record fundraisers. There is significantly less conflict within the city government, and public meetings attract record attendance.

How and Why the Strategy is Working

Given Helena's preliminary success with the Delta Bridge project, the question then becomes, how and why has this small Delta town been able to turn the corner on 40 years of disinvestment and downward spiral? First, Delta Bridge was triggered by a pervasive sense of desperation in Helena, and the opportunity for new leaders to step forward arose from this adversity. Second, from the beginning, Delta Bridge was an inclusive community-wide process initiated by a local institution with significant clout in the community. To increase the project's potential for success, Southern made a long-term commitment to the process and was careful to bring community leaders from all corners of Helena into the process at the outset. Finally, because of the history of community mobilization around the King Biscuit Blues Festival, people in Helena have a track record – albeit a limited one – of working together.

Opportunity arose from adversity. Joe Black was pointed in his explanation of local conditions just prior to Delta Bridge. "In 2003, Helena hit the bottom," he said. Economic and social conditions were so bad, and relations between the sister towns were so acidic, that something had to change. Delta Bridge effectively harnessed this energy, or momentum, for change and shifted the paradigm for development in a manner that had not been possible in the past.

For Delta Bridge to work, local organizations had to give up some amount of control. For example, Southern had to surrender the authority for approving local grants to the Local Development Council. Any organization working on issues of housing, economic development, education, health care or leadership development in Helena had to make strategic decisions that adhered to the priorities outlined in the community plan. Organizations that had been accountable only to a board of directors were now additionally accountable to a Delta Bridge goal team (and ultimately to the steering committee). Not only did the extreme adversity make average citizens willing to participate in long and difficult conversations about their community's future, but it also made organizational leaders throughout Helena willing to accept a new process for development.

In addition, it was out of this adversity that new leadership came forward. According to Ben Steinberg, the president of Southern, a tremendous amount of the credit for Delta Bridge goes to fresh, young leaders – those who are less steeped in the towns' contentious history and who are unwilling to watch their hometown descend further into chaos. Michael Boone, 28, embodies this movement. A Helena native and former lineman for the Ole Miss football team, Boone rejected opportunities to do other things and returned to his hometown because he wanted to make a difference. He felt that folks in Helena had lost hope, and he wanted to be a part of bringing hope back into the community. Boone is now a community-development specialist for Southern and was recently elected to be treasurer of Helena. He is one of the many new, young leaders who have come forward.

Inclusive planning and implementation process. Southern, as the primary financier for development projects in Helena, exercised political and economic leverage to bring other organizations to the table. Southern's on-the-ground community development staff also were critical to Southern's ability to overcome community inertia and get a broad cross section of the community to participate. The nature of its relationship to the community allowed Southern to bring organizations and individuals into the process.

The inclusiveness of the strategic planning process – with representatives from government, community organizations, for-profit and nonprofit interests, resource providers and average citizens – was crucial. "The Delta Bridge (strategic planning) process was open to everybody in the community," said Helena native Zelda Simes. "It didn't matter who you were, what your job was or whether you had money."

Not only was the planning process inclusive, but the implementation process is as well. The steering committee reflects the geographic, racial and gender composition of Phillips County. Each goal team is required to reflect diverse community interests. And, unlike previous development projects in Helena, Delta Bridge is being driven by a broad cross section of the community.

Local and long-term commitment by partner organizations. For the last 40 years, various federal, state and regional initiatives to "save the Delta" have come and gone, but few have shown substantial results. Even fewer have created infrastructure or capacity at the local level to help local people solve local problems. Given this history, it was important for Southern and Walton to make a long-term commitment to the Delta Bridge project. "This is just the beginning of a 20-year strategy," said Steinberg of Southern Financial Partners. Although not all are native to Helena or Arkansas, Southern's staff, specifically those involved with Delta Bridge, all live in town. Southern's local presence in Helena minimizes the perception that this is just another group of do-gooders coming in from the outside to save the Delta.

History of community mobilization. The King Biscuit Blues Festival requires a massive amount of volunteer effort. Each year, 400 volunteers work tirelessly to put the event together. This effort has been important ingredients in the success of Delta Bridge. Even though the event happens only once a year, civic leaders in Helena knew each other and knew how to work together before Delta Bridge.

What are the lessons from this story?

Short-term success can build long-term momentum. It was important, from the beginning, that Delta Bridge not be perceived as just another effort to “save the Delta.” Nor was it a just another strategic plan that would sit on the shelf. To maintain buy-in from the community, the process needed to demonstrate success quickly. For this reason, the goal teams first tackled action steps that could be accomplished in short order and for which there was already some momentum. Once people started seeing change happen, they had more of an incentive to join in the process.

Look for opportunity in adversity. People are more willing to change long-held behaviors and beliefs under conditions of hardship and adversity. Not only might new leaders come forward, but “worker bees” are typically more willing to participate in projects when they, or their friends and neighbors, are struggling. Hard times should be viewed as an opportunity to mobilize a community by focusing on what can be done to turn things around, as opposed to what is wrong. “Delta Bridge led to the realization that people can control their own destiny and that a poor person’s fate is not predetermined,” one resident said. This shift in the perception of local residents would not have been likely without widespread adversity.

Community planning must be an inclusive process. The value of a community strategic plan or vision document depends entirely on the extent to which a truly representative sample of the community is involved in creating the plan. Plans that are created by a subset of any community are destined to affect only the subset involved in its creation. Given Helena’s history of racial strife, leadership at Southern knew that the Delta Bridge planning process had to be inclusive and that making it so would require a long and intensive effort. In fact, it took 18 months and over 500 meetings to create the plan. Southern invested a tremendous amount of staff time toward bringing every constituency to the table, including black, white, young, old, newcomers and old-timers.

Get the right people involved from the beginning. “From the outset, Southern was very deliberate in terms of bringing respected members of the community into the process,” said Paula Oliver, the Helena Main Street director. During the initial asset-mapping process, the informal leadership structure in and around Phillips County was identified and sought out. Informal leaders included school teachers, retired elected officials, pastors, frequent community volunteers and small business owners. Bringing all the respected leaders into the process early can help minimize community resistance when the going gets tough.

Solicit support from high-level politicians and leaders. When a community comes together and mobilizes, as Helena has, leaders should not shy away from seeking support from high-level public authorities. When governors or representatives in Congress learn about a community in their district undertaking radical reform, they can help bring additional resources to the effort. Recognition and support for the Delta Bridge project has come from U.S. senators and congressional representatives from Arkansas, the president of the state's university system, the governor of Arkansas and others. This support may parlay into additional resources for the Delta region. With the strategy developed by and firmly rooted in the local community, reaching out to tap regional, state and even national resources is likely to bring new partners to the table rather than create dependency on outside resources.

Contact information

Joe Black

Vice President
Southern Financial Partners
Helena-West Helena, Arkansas
870-816-1113
jblack@southernfp.org

Michael Boone

Community Development Specialist
Southern Financial Partners
Helena-West Helena, Arkansas
870- 816-1121
mboone@southernfp.org