

Help for rural counties struggling to keep up

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Rural areas in South Carolina are often caught at an economic disadvantage. Historically, these areas are plagued with poor educational opportunities, lack of economic development, and high unemployment rates. The problems are often cyclical: few or no economic opportunities limit the tax base; schools suffer without a broad tax base; and businesses and industry won't locate in an area with poor schools or which lack needed infrastructure.

These rural counties are struggling to meet the tax base growth requirements that are necessary to sustain public service costs. Caught in an effort just to maintain current levels of services, the counties and cities in rural South Carolina typically lack the infrastructure support systems and the financial capacity to make improvements that would allow them to take advantage of or to attract new economic opportunities. If the economic outlook for these rural areas remains static or diminishes, then they will face increasing threats of economic decline in the 21st century.

It is important to give these economically depressed areas of our state every available tool to help them climb out of this obstinate and discouraging condition. As federal funds for rural economic development become increasingly scarce, local governments have to find a way to go it alone. One way to address this was to improve upon existing statutes.

In 1999, the Legislature attempted to address the need for local governments to find a way to route tax revenue to pay for infrastructure that would enhance an area and make it appealing for the private market to develop. This approach grows the tax base without increasing taxes or requiring any special assessments. However, rural counties were not able to take advantage of this approach because the statute was too restrictive in its language.

Santee-Lynches Regional Council of Governments' Board of Directors, with guidance from the Agency's Executive Director, James T. Darby, Jr., worked with its respective legislative delegation members to introduce Senate bill S 97 and House bill H 3742 to address these concerns. Senator John C. Land, III, (D-Clarendon) sponsored the Senate bill; I sponsored the House bill. Rep. Bill Herbkersman (R-Beaufort) became a strong ally as we also worked to extend the changes to municipalities. The General Assembly passed the Senate version of the bill with the House amendments and overrode the Governor's veto now making it possible for rural counties and municipalities to take advantage of this economic development tool.

Moving South Carolina forward means no part of South Carolina should be left behind. With the passage of this bill, rural local governments all over the state will have the opportunity to broaden local tax bases because public infrastructure improvements will make it attractive for private developers, businesses, and industry to invest in those communities. This increase in economic development activity will benefit the local schools, the local economy, and the well-being of the community as a whole.

If you would like any additional information on this bill, or any other legislation under consideration by the General Assembly, please call your legislative office in Columbia (803-742-3044); my office in Camden (803-432-0188); or write Post Office Box 188, Camden, SC 29020. Thank you for the opportunity to serve you in the SC House of Representatives.