

Helena business boosted by grant Center to assist region's startups

DAVID SMITH

ARKANSAS DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE

The Delta Bridge Project, a collaboration of Southern Bancorp and Phillips County organizations, has awarded a \$186,000 grant for a business incubator in Helena-West Helena. The incubator is one of dozens of projects Southern Bancorp and community leaders are employing to revitalize Helena-West Helena and Phillips County. The projects may take as long as 20 years to create significant change in the area, one of the poorest in the state, organizers say.

The money will be used to renovate, equip and staff a 9,100-square-foot facility in a downtown building owned by Phillips Community College of the University of Arkansas. It is to be finished by the summer. A major goal is to create at least eight viable businesses in the first three years of its operation. The incubator also is expected to help 20 more off-site clients a year with marketing and strategic planning.

"The primary focus for us is business retention and expansion," said Doug Friedlander, executive director of the Phillips County Chamber of Commerce and chairman of the project steering committee. Thrive, a local nonprofit group, already is working with three groups, helping them form a business plan, said Will Staley, co-founder and director of creative services for the organization.

Arkadelphia-based Southern Bancorp, the largest rural development bank in the country, has a branch in Helena-West Helena with six offices in Phillips County and two in Mississippi.

The incubator will take individuals or groups through a one-year fellowship program to help them create a business or organization. Committing to a one-year program is required. "The goal of the program is to give entrepreneurs the tools needed to start successful small businesses and nonprofits in Phillips County," Terrance Clark, director of strategic services for Thrive, said in a prepared statement.

For the first three months, evening workshops will teach concepts of business and organizational planning. For the next three months, the groups will create a business plan. For the final six months, businesses will have office space to use in the incubator.

The incubator is accepting applications until Jan. 5. Interested applicants should visit the Thrive office at 310 Cherry St. in Helena-West Helena to pick up an application or e-mail fellowship@thrivecenter.org.