



November 17th, 2010 | By Larry E. Binz / [The Clarksdale Press Register](#)

The Delta Bridge Project is finally getting down to the nitty gritty as area business and professional leaders gathered this past week to outline many of Coahoma County's assets, liabilities and potential for growth.

"We've been talking about it. We need to get started," Joe Black told a crowd of about 100 gathered Thursday afternoon in the Clarksdale Civic Auditorium.

Black, president of Southern Bancorp's Capital Partners, and Joe Webb, Northwest Mississippi Regional Medical Center's chief operating officer, presided at the strategy sessions. Webb is serving as chairman of the Delta Bridge Project's steering committee.

The three sessions – one at Jonestown and two in the Clarksdale Civic Auditorium – brought more than 200 business and professional leaders to outline the pros and cons about the county.

"This is not a government program. It's a private endeavor," Black stated. "These meetings are for our mutual benefit."

Black said some \$800,000 had already been invested to boost the county including \$150,000 toward the Sunflower River weir project.

Black cited the DBP's five pillars – economic development, education, health care, housing and leadership.

Webb noted that one-third of the 26,000-plus residents of Coahoma County live "below the poverty level" and that unemployment stands at 12.4 percent.

"One out of 15 schools is considered successful while the others are either on the academic watch list or failing," Webb said.

Webb said 60 percent of the single family housing in Coahoma County is occupied.

During the breakout sessions, some of Coahoma County's strengths the participants cited were:

- Coahoma County is blessed with fertile land that is conducive to its heritage as a strong agricultural region.
- Carnegie Public Library has been a mainstay in Clarksdale for many years. Carnegie Director Missie Craig said Monday records show the library was opened in 1914.
- The cost of living is lower than most areas in the nation.
- Proximity to the Mississippi River serves as an economic/industrial advantage.
- Coahoma County is a strong faith community.
- Coahoma County has a deep cultural heritage that includes its history and Blues.
- Proximity to Memphis is an advantage.

The participants referred to the potential as opportunities for Clarksdale and Coahoma County. They included the following:

- The Clarksdale downtown revitalization program is well under way.
- The county has a legacy for producing athletes.
- There is a strong for a cinema complex.
- Coahoma County needs to Capitalize on its history and culture.
- The county needs to promote local talent.
- We should build on tourism.
- Visitors should be encouraged to stay longer.
- The Field is wide open for youth programs.

The participants were in general agreement about the following shortcomings:

- The population is declining steadily.
- The area is seeing a continued loss of qualified teachers moving to more lucrative areas.
- There is a lack of skilled workers that could attract more industry.
- Racial division still exists.
- Rising taxes are hampering economic growth.
- Many residents still have a negative perception of Clarksdale and Coahoma County.

Fredalyn Frasier, vice president for AECOM Design and Planning, was on hand to gather the information from the breakout meetings to take back to Atlanta.

Lois McMurchy, Southern Bancorp's senior community development officer and the DBP manager, said Monday the next phase would be for goals teams to meet in December.

"The goals teams will meet on their own to assimilate what goals need to be attained," McMurchy said.

Sessions similar to those last week in Clarksdale and Jonestown are planned at Coahoma and Lula, McMurchy said. The Delta Bridge Project kickoff was held Oct. 12 in the Pinnacle at Coahoma Community College.

Tim Schurgina, McMurchy's counterpart with Southern Bancorp in Phillips County, Ark., said the Delta Bridge Project that began there in 2005 is moving into its second phase.

"We've just finalized a 2010-2020 strategic plan for Phillips County," Schuringa said. "We have seen a number of accomplishments during the past six years."

Schruinga said with Delta Bridge Project serving as the catalyst, Phillips County has witnessed the development of the new Phillips County Boys and Girls Club facility; the creation of KIPP Delta Public Schools in downtown Helena; the development of Delta

Blues Farms, a sweet potato processing facility off U.S. Highway 49 west of Helena-West Helena, and the opening of the new Phillips County Library on Columbia Street in downtown Helena.