

Perspectives from Government Representatives in Southern Illinois

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Objectives

Public officials constitute the political voice in Southern Illinois. They make decisions about the allocation of resources and, at least theoretically, articulate the vision for the region's development in the future. As part of the Southern Illinois Regional Assessment Project, we conducted 31 in-depth personal interviews among Southern Illinois public officials involved in government or public affairs between June and October of 2007. We defined public officials as people holding the position of mayors, county clerks, executive directors and presidents of chambers of commerce, law enforcement, legal representation, economic developers and statewide officials. Interviews were taken from 14 counties within the 20 county region of assessment. These counties included: Alexander, Edwards, Jackson, Johnson, Massac, Saline, Perry, Pope, Pulaski, Randolph, Union, Wabash, Williamson, and White. The objectives of the interviews were:

- To determine what government officials considered as constituting Southern Illinois and what makes that place unique.
- To determine how individuals identified with the region.
- To determine perceived threats and opportunities to the region.
- To identify community, regional or local actions to address threats and opportunities.
- To determine perceptions of the role of Dixon Springs Agricultural Center and whether that role has changed over time.
- To garner opinions and suggestions as to how the Dixon Springs Agricultural could better serve the needs of the region.

Methodology

Interview participants consisted of government and public officials contacted by the interviewer via a combination of telephone calls and emails. All but one interview was conducted in person by appointment. The remaining interview was conducted by telephone. The survey instrument was composed of open-ended questions. After obtaining participant consent, in-person interviews were voice recorded and later transcribed.

Research Findings

What Constitutes Southern Illinois and Uniquely Defines the Region?

The interpretations by government officials of what constitutes Southern Illinois were remarkably similar. The majority of those interviewed (15) said Mt. Vernon/I64 and Effingham/I70 constituted the northern edge of the region. Some mentioned Illinois Route 50 (between I70 and I64) as a dividing line in the past. Several individuals gave more extreme answers. One said Southern Illinois was anything south of Champaign County. Another said that anything north of Pope County could not be considered Southern Illinois.

When I was a kid in Olney, I used to think of the street going in front of my house, Route 50, as the dividing line between S. Illinois and N. Illinois.

Anything above Mt Vernon, you begin to get into flatland territory. Nothing but cropland. They don't have the beauty we have down here.

I70 is almost a straight dividing line, separating us from central Illinois. Thought those folks wouldn't know we existed."

Those interviewed generally mentioned the hilly topography of the area, the variability in the soils and the vast amount of natural resources such as coal, oil, the rivers and forests as being genuinely distinctive to Southern Illinois. The type of life was also a determinant, noting it to be slower paced, along with historical roots.

At one time... you could trace your roots back 1- 200 yrs.

Most respondents noted that those who immigrated into Southern Illinois were of differing origin from the Northern Illinois immigrants—coming from the south in the Carolina region and Appalachia. They also note the deep sense of individualism operating along with strong community ties and religiosity. Most depicted the region as agrarian, economically poor, and rural, with coal county respondents more concerned with economic issues such as job creation.

Everyone knows everyone.

It's as close to the Garden of Eden as you will find on this earth.

As former Senator Paul Simon used to say "Carbondale is actually more south than Richmond, VA, so instead of us being from the Midwest, we're from the mid-south.

...we can come together when we need to. For example, Mt Carmel has 25 churches, and Albion has 14.

What Participants Call Home

Most of those surveyed (21) identified with their town. However, eight of the 21 see a shift beginning to occur in which people identify more with their region than their county or town.

The identity of community of place had largely to do with politics (a previous Congressional district was seen as representing Southern Illinois) and local rivalries (Friday night high school football games stoked a sense of spirited contention amongst towns). As one said:

Southern Illinois was split up in 1988 or 1990 into three congressional districts. Before that, Southern Illinois has a unified idea of our region's boundaries since it was one Congressional district.

Threats to the Region

The greatest threats mentioned for the region were lack of jobs, the overall out-migration of educated youth, the in-migration of elderly/retirees in need of already resource-constrained services, and a lack of infrastructure in roads and communications technologies. There was a stream of interconnectedness expressed by the respondents as this all worked in a downward spiral of sorts (as we lose jobs, we lose opportunity, we lose the youth seeking opportunity, property values decline, and retirees move to our crumbling community which cannot provide them with specialized care).

People I went to school with don't live here because of the depressed nature. They can't make a living here.

My children probably won't come back when they leave for school. Missouri and Kentucky offer incentives for our students to go to those states for college, but SIU doesn't if I recall correctly."

Education, from K-12 to college level, was often viewed as being in crisis standing due to its reliance on the severely strained property tax system. Respondents remarked on the need to remain competitive from the educational standpoint, which required additional tax revenue from an already financially strained community.

My daughter is number one in her class, and I'm afraid to have her take the ACT's, that's how bad our schools are. We don't offer any kind of choice locally, and it doesn't reflect well when our public school teachers send their own kids off to school elsewhere.

We have a struggle to remain competitive by providing better education. The problem is the folks in this area who have lost their good-paying jobs

can't afford to shell out much more. At some point, the State's gonna have to get involved, or something has to give.

Intergovernmental competition between localities and border regions (Evanston, Indiana as well as the St Louis metro regions), along with the inability to draw the attention of State government for vital necessities are also viewed as complex threats.

It takes a lot of effort to change mindsets in small towns. The folks are stuck in their ways due to their roots and family heritage. They don't like outsiders telling them what to do.

One respondent referred to the State's narrow-minded focus of assistance being the provision of jobs through prison expansion and educational institutions as "barbed wire and bubble gum." Much of this held constant amongst the various public officials. The biggest deviation came from law enforcement and legal representatives who spoke of the threat of drugs, specifically methamphetamine, as a major threat to the area. They saw forest amenities as problematic in this context since it served as shelter for drug production ventures (note that all such officials were located near the Shawnee).

We'll find roving meth labs abandoned in the Shawnee, and Forest Service don't do a thing to help.

Opportunities for the Region

Opportunities for the region most often mentioned by participants involved ag-supported bio-fuels, value-added agriculture such as wineries, orchards and organics, access to diverse modes of transportation for industrial use (river, rail, interstate), and utilizing natural resources more creatively.

There's no reason the Forest Service couldn't work with local agriculture to promote some sort of sustainable tree-farming practices.

The potential of transportation has never been recognized in the region. Our location in the Midwest and access to modes of transportation, especially the river and rail, should make us a boomtown.

Those public officials located near major areas of transit (Metropolis, Marion, Cairo) were most often those who mentioned proximity to transit as an opportunity. The proximity to metro regions (St Louis, Indianapolis, Paducah), abundance of educational institutions (SIU, John A. Logan, etc.) and tourism based upon nature preserves and historical relics were all seen as already existing assets. One interviewee also mentioned that there is opportunity in finding solutions to problems, whereas another noted the void of small business development was itself a huge opportunity.

You can get to St Louis in under two hours, Indianapolis in about four, and Paducah in two. We offer a quiet, safe place to live within driving distance of a number of cities.

You probably didn't know this region has a rich history pertaining to the Civil War and Revolutionary War. We get a lot of reenactors coming to the area."

We have a gentleman in Pinckneyville... he has a publishing firm.... Employs 60 - 70 people.... He is using technology ahead of the curve in S. Illinois. He is setting a valuable example we are using to encourage others to use in starting a business. Some would say he is a young, brash know-it-all, but he clearly knows something a lot of us don't.

Actions Addressing Threats

The brain drain issue was constantly discussed and appears to be in the initial stages of being addressed. There were various policy ideas tossed around to keep entrepreneurial and educated youth in the area, but no clear initiative has yet emerged. Many locales are hiring contractors for the purposes of seeking economic development, and others are forming regional economic development non-profits with other communities for mutual gain. This is largely viewed as a response to the perceived inaction of the State.

A few years back, the State tried to coordinate some events for the wineries. The owners got fed up with it and formed their own association. They've been so successful branding Southern Illinois wine that the orchards look to be following suit.

Connect SI is an initiative to we've been hearing about a lot lately. They're supposed to bring internet to the area.

Here in Marion, we have to do thing ourselves. With the gambling boat revenues, we're able to pay for the expanded highway, and put in our own street lamps.

Y'see, we just don't have the population you have up north. We can't get their attention for even the barest necessities. We need roads, we need internet and cell phone towers, as well as more money for jobs and schools.

Law enforcement again deviated from the status quo of public officials since they deal with a uniquely different set of public policies. The drug problem was being dealt with by leveraging their resources, working together, forming task forces, sharing equipment, facilities and personnel across their jurisdictions.

Me and the other Sheriffs in the Southern Five, we all grew up together. Two of the guys lived just down the street from me when we were kids, and the other two I went to high school with. It makes it real easy to work together. We just trust each other. We stay tuned to each others frequencies just in case they need back up, and you bet we will cross boundary lines to help each other out. That's how we do it down here.

Actions Addressing Opportunities

Community cooperation appeared to be an emerging trend, as well as the existing locally vibrant industries forming coalitions to leverage their resources for mutual benefit (the winery and the fruit orchard associations for example who are creating wine and orchards trails). Cities such as Marion have eschewed past rivalries and instead of competing for incoming businesses now cooperate in recognition that a factory *anywhere* in the vicinity is better than one driven away due to local enmity.

We learned a while back that it's not worth it to compete for a factory. We formed these regional development groups to change that infighting mindset. Now those of us here in Marion are happy if Cartersville gets a factory. If they have businesses, they'll probably provide jobs for our people, and that's a good thing!

Dixon Springs Agricultural Center Findings

About a third of respondents were not familiar with the Dixon Springs Agricultural Center, whereas another third knew only of its existence, not specifically what it did or how it had changed over time. These government officials tended to be located a distance away from Dixon Springs, residing in Massac, Williamson, Perry, Jackson, Wabash, and Edwards counties. Other officials proclaimed ignorance or lack of interest in agricultural issues in explaining why they were unaware of DSAC. The following quotes exemplify these groups:

I haven't heard of it, and I am from the region.

I think my kids went blueberry pickin' with their school one year.

The remainders of those interviewed (roughly one third) were fully aware of Dixon Springs and its services offered. Not surprisingly, those government officials aware of Dixon Springs either came from the surrounding counties or from agriculturally dependent areas. Those who were fully aware of Dixon Springs knew of it through attending a program or utilizing the facility for functions such as berry picking though none were aware of specific ongoing research at the Center. Dixon Springs is seen as having a development role in working with crops and people and is perceived as being important to the region in that it is capable of researching agricultural practices that are

relevant to the region. Those respondents who knew of Dixon Springs did not dispute the historically positive impact it has had for the region, and most who were aware of it expressed a strong sense of nostalgia.

Most of those who know about the Center agreed that it could have a greater influence on the region. Common thoughts were that the Center should assist with value added crop production such as bio-fuels, organics, and inland fisheries. Others believed it should work to promote conservation, assist with existing agricultural-industries (wineries, orchards), and provide jobs to the area.

One respondent, when asked what Dixon Springs could do to better contribute to the region, said “Anything.”

I sure would hate to see it go. It has done a lot for local farmers, and provided jobs for this area. It would do a lot of harm to close it down.

While there is not as much farming proportionally in Southern Illinois as there is in the rest of the state, agriculture is still a big part of our lives, and our culture. The corporatization of farming, whereby we lose the family farm and move toward homogenous crops like corn, threatens all of us, but more-so Southern Illinois. Dixon Springs could go a long way to not only promote new crops, but also new farmers, and make Southern Illinois a leader in innovative agricultural practices. That Center has more potential than folks down here recognize.