Regional Initiative to Focus on Rural Prosperity in Lower Illinois River Valley

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(ALTON, IL | QUINCY, IL) – The Lower Illinois River Valley-Rural Prosperity Initiative (LIRV-RPI) announces its public launch. The newly created non-profit organization seeks to immediately leverage the capacity-building strength of local institutions to assist community leaders in unleashing a wave of rural innovation and entrepreneurship.

Experts are telling us that rural America is on the decline and that we should plan for a continued downturn. But, we have a choice to self-determine the fate of our rural places. Perhaps, there is an alternative path that is at once innovative, actionable and local that can begin to rebuild vibrant rural communities. Elsewhere around the country a growing number of local entrepreneurs are innovating and collaborating to make improvements that could prove to be scalable and difference-making for rural communities.

Over the last two years, a small group of regional and local service providers have been considering a grassroots approach to rebuilding our communities and economy by reviewing practical and successful efforts in similar communities across the U.S. Today, this group is making a commitment and investment in our region with the launch of the Lower Illinois River Valley-Rural Prosperity Initiative.

“Bulk agriculture commodities cannot and will not provide the jobs and the tax base to have viable thriving communities in the Lower Illinois River Valley. Community colleges, universities, banks, farm organizations, businesses, and government entities must work to broaden our economic base in the region.” said Phil Bradshaw, Bradshaw Family Farms based in Griggsville, IL and Director of LIRV-RPI.
Blake Roderick, Executive Director, Pike-Scott Farm Bureau added, “Farmers make up less than two percent of the population, but every Illinois farmer feeds approximately 155 people. The Pike-Scott Farm Bureau recognizes the importance of engaging everyone. We all need to pull in the same direction. Our collaboration with the Lower Illinois River Valley — Rural Prosperity Initiative gives producers in this region another valued partner and an opportunity to help build and demonstrate lasting solutions to rural Illinois’ most pressing challenges.”

The LIRV-RPI will initially focus on a nine-county corridor along the lower 80 miles of the Illinois River following an exploratory effort between Lewis and Clark Community College (LCCC) and John Wood Community College (JWCC) to enhance service to the rural core of their adjoining districts. LCCC and JWCC communicated with a cross-section of community institutions to initially scope a path forward. This Ad Hoc Working Group includes the Illinois Electric Cooperative, Pike-Scott Farm Bureau, University of Illinois Extension, and the Great Rivers Land Trust, assisted by THG Advisors.

“Our region could benefit greatly by revealing an integrated actionable plan to bring rural communities forward in a largely self-determined manner. Locally driven collaborative problem-solving approaches are crucial to the future of rural America” said Dr. Dale Chapman, President, Lewis & Clark Community College.

“Every day John Wood Community College listens to and plans with local people and business partners to meet the needs within our unique communities,” Michael Elbe, President, John Wood Community College shared. “We are proud to collaborate with the Lower Illinois River Valley Rural Prosperity Initiative to help apply a similar capacity-building, common-sense approach to propel more innovation and entrepreneurship. The curiosity and creativity of our local people applied to this shared goal can bring a new wave of prosperity to our deserving communities.”

The Working Group commenced with identifying and framing regional challenges and opportunities, utilizing the focus areas put forth by the White House’s Federal Interagency Task Force for Agriculture and Rural Prosperity. As a result, LIRV-RPI is considering anchoring initiatives across several key areas, including e-connectivity/broadband deployment; workforce
development; agricultural innovation; town center revitalization; outdoor recreation, health care/telemedicine; and source water retention/protection.

Patrick McGinnis, Senior Representative with THG Advisors, and a fifth generation Illinois River Valley product, is serving as Interim Executive Director for LIRV-RPI. “Applying local capacity strategically and assembling the right mix of resources – human, institutional, and financial – will be crucial to driving real change,” said McGinnis. “The Lower Illinois River Valley is a rich corridor of natural and human capital and is ready for targeted investment and transformative change. We need change that preserves our natural and cultural heritage, while demonstrating a strong regional brand that our region is a great place to work, live, and play. It’s going to take a collective effort to buck the trends for rural America. The Valley is a great place to start.”

“The Lower Illinois River Valley is a focus area for Great Rivers Land Trust. The region has been identified as a ‘resource rich area’ by scientists and other experts because of the abundance of biological resources,” said Alley Ringhausen, Executive Director, Great Rivers Land Trust. “The confluence of two major rivers has resulted in an array of aquatic resources, wetlands, flood plains, forested bluffs, glades and rich soils. The Valley is the perfect opportunity for a blend of conservation and recreational activities,” he added.

Looking ahead, the LIRV-RPI will work collaboratively to develop actionable strategies to advance key anchoring initiatives with performance measured outputs to achieve the following key objectives: increasing local entrepreneurship and jobs; developing catalytic projects that seed future investments; developing a supportive environment needed for economic development to thrive; and formulating actionable place-making strategies that build community vibrancy and social capital.

“The LIRV-RPI regional model of collaboration will provide entrepreneurs, local leaders, students, and residents access to educational resources, partnerships and networks essential for measurable economic impact within our communities,” said Jennifer Russell, Community and Economic Development Educator, University of Illinois Extension and a Director of LIRV-RPI.

LIRV-RPI is committed to supporting local economic development strategies and planning efforts of partnering organizations in a manner that reveals the power of cooperation across
communities and organizations, and the importance of collective impact validated by real metrics. LIRV-RPI was not created to overlap or dilute efforts of county boards and local economic development groups, but rather to explore additional ways to assist communities to augment ongoing efforts to win positive exposure, gain investor attention, and build our region’s self-reliance.

“I’m excited about the energy and enthusiasm of this group. Prominent local institutions will be central to this effort, serving as capacity builders, conveners, and consensus builders, empowering individual entrepreneurs and advancing collective actions that reveal an instructive regional model of cooperation and measured impact,” according to Shawn Rennecker with the Illinois Electric Cooperative, Mayor of Barry, IL, and a Director of LIRV-RPI.

During the remainder of 2019, LIRV-RPI will be broadening its engagement of stakeholders and businesses throughout the region to gather input on their challenges, needs and opportunities for collective impact.

For additional information, contact Patrick McGinnis, Executive Director, LIRV-RPI at pmcginnis@lirv-rpi.org. To track the group’s progress, visit www.lirv-rpi.org.