

# CONNECT SI:

**Regional Prosperity  
through Collaborations in Southern Illinois**



# Regional Collaboration Promotes Prosperity

Several years ago, Southern Illinois was in dire economic straits. The coal industry that had been the region's lifeblood was decimated. The state's 23 southernmost counties had the lowest per capita income in the state, according to the report produced for the 2004 Illinois Poverty Summit.<sup>1</sup> The federal government defined the area as a medically underserved region. Young people were leaving the region in search of better opportunities.

A 2003 study of three southern counties by the Southern Illinois Coal Belt Champion Community found that two big barriers to economic development in the region were lack of Internet connectivity and lack of regional cooperation. The ideas gained traction at the 2005 Southern Illinois Community Leaders Conference, and the Southern Illinois Broadband Initiative was formed over a 17-county area. By 2006, it had expanded to 20 counties as the Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity backed the effort.

In early 2006, Southern Illinois University at Carbondale (SIU) assumed leadership of the project – renamed Connect SI (Southern Illinois) – through the office of the president, Dr. Glenn Poshard. Dr. Poshard saw the importance of broadband connectivity from the start. “We were dealing with the rest of the world through a straw,” he says. “We needed a pipeline.”

At the start of 2006, the broadband take rate for Southern Illinois – the number of households with access to broadband that buy it – was only 12 percent. Today, thanks in large part to the work of Connect SI, broadband availability is much greater and the take rate is more than 54 percent. (The take rate for rural communities nationally is 66 percent.<sup>2</sup>) Other economic development projects – in particular, the expansion of online health care education and services – have followed.

Regional collaboration has been integral to the effort from the start. “When we kicked this off, we emphasized that it had to be a public-private venture,” says Poshard. “We had to incorporate everyone – small business, the health care industry, economic development organizations.”

The early involvement of the Delta Regional Authority (DRA)—a federal-state regional commission for chronically distressed counties along the Mississippi River, including 16 Southern Illinois counties—was instrumental in fostering regional collaboration and starting Connect SI. In fact, Connect SI received DRA funding in its first year for broadband expansion.

## VISION

**Connect SI will be a national leader for collaborative rural economic transformation fueled by world class broadband and healthcare.**

## MISSION

**Connect SI will, through regional collaboration, encourage and sustain economic growth while valuing quality of life in southern Illinois.**

## GOALS

**Our goal is for southern Illinois to become the fastest growing economic region in Illinois—a gateway to the global economy. We are working to develop a diverse economy, plus strengthen the capabilities of existing industries to create sustainable economic growth that ensures better-paying employment and business opportunities for residents of our region.**



The four regional planning commissions serving the area—Greater Egypt Regional Planning and Development Commission, Greater Wabash Regional Planning Commission, Southeastern Illinois Regional Planning and Development Commission, and Southern Five Regional Planning District and Development Commission—were part of the regional collaboration from the beginning. They now work more closely with each other as they join together in Connect SI efforts, and Connect SI offers resources that fit well with their regional Comprehensive Economic Development Strategies (CEDs).<sup>3</sup>

The emphasis on collaboration and regional cooperation was new. “We were operating in silos,” says Cary Minnis, who has been active in Connect SI from the beginning and is now executive director of the Greater Egypt Regional Planning and Development Commission. But the urgent need to lift the region out of poverty helped bring people together. Consultant Frank Knott of ViTAL Economy helped local officials understand the importance of broadband connectivity as a necessary base for economic development. Connect SI held dozens of local meetings to identify the goals and aspirations of the region, and collaboration and Internet connectivity emerged as twin goals, says Rex Duncan, the first executive director of Connect SI and now president of the Connect SI Foundation and director of community development and outreach at SIU.

“I was talking to a graduate class at SIU,” says Duncan, “and a student said, ‘In Africa, we had broadband before we had water and sewer.’ It was one of those defining moments. Broadband is as critical to infrastructure today as water lines and sewer lines.” Leadership of the project moved in late 2007 from SIU to

Man-Tra-Con Corporation, a management company that works closely with the Southern Illinois Workforce Investment Board. The Connect SI Foundation has been a 501(c) (3) tax-exempt nonprofit corporation since 2009.

In 2007, Connect SI set some hefty goals to be met by 2012:

- > 27,298 new high-wage jobs
- > \$642 million in new knowledge-based activity by 1,600 firms (this means professional services, particularly in science, technology, engineering, and math)
- > More than \$2 billion in new annual wages
- > 4,500 families with new health care coverage
- > 10,000 residents lifted out of poverty
- > \$200 million invested in information technology.

“They were audacious to begin with,” says Kathy Lively, executive director of the Connect SI Foundation. The numbers came from adding up the goals set by each of the four sub regional Communities of Interest (generally built on regional planning commission boundaries). But then the national recession, combined with three major manufacturers shutting down, caused the loss of 2,000 well-paying jobs in the region. Rather than reset the goals, Connect SI plans to work with a consultant to reassess its path in 2013.

To meet its goals, Connect SI has embarked on community initiatives in broadband connectivity, health care, youth leadership, agriculture, and energy. And it is providing the four regional planning and development commissions in its area with online tools to access and sort economic and demographic data.

## What are Regional Planning and Development Commissions?

Across the nation, a network of over 500 multi-jurisdictional regional development organizations (RDOs)—public-based entities that are focused on fostering regional strategies, partnerships, and solutions—work to solve areawide issues, including addressing the fundamental building blocks needed to sustain resilient and competitive communities and economies.

RDOs pursue their mission and goals by fostering intergovernmental collaboration among federal, state, and local partners. They deliver and manage various federal and state programs, with an increased focus on leveraging resources, engaging the private and non-profit sectors, and ensuring public accountability, transparency and results. Based on state and local needs, these entities often play a key role in community and economic development strategies, housing, emergency management and homeland security preparedness, Geographic Information System (GIS) data analysis and information management, business development finance, technology and telecommunications, transportation planning and public transportation services, and workforce development.

As organizations typically formed under state law or gubernatorial executive order, RDOs are often known locally by many different names, such as: regional planning commissions, councils of governments, economic development districts, local development districts, planning and development districts, regional councils, and regional development commissions.

In Illinois, RDOs are known as referred to collectively as Regional Council. As like their peers nationwide, they are voluntary multi-service entities formed under state law to serve local government planning needs. The primary function of the state’s regional councils is to study the needs and conditions of a region and to develop strategies which enhance the region’s communities.

## Broadband Connectivity

“We have mayors of small towns come to us and say, ‘Help us get broadband,’” says President of the Connect SI Foundation Rex Duncan. Private Internet providers had come together through Connect SI, but the group’s leaders could not show enough local demand to justify the investment. So they started Iwantmybroadband.com, a site where residents could register their broadband need and submit it directly to network providers.

Connect SI leaders began mapping areas of aggregation to flag potential markets. Very small rural communities – such as Omaha, Ill., population 350 – were able to get Internet access after interested citizens went door to door to collect names of people willing to pay for it, according to Duncan.

Now Connect SI is working with a statewide initiative led by Partnership for a Connected Illinois that is trying to bring broadband connectivity throughout the state with a variety of platforms. The biggest current project is for Clearwave Communications to build a 740-mile high-speed fiber network across Southern Illinois’s 23-county region. The project will double the network’s size and directly connect 232 community anchor institutions with speeds between 10 Mbps and 1 Gbps, including public schools, health care facilities, public safety institutions, libraries, and community colleges.<sup>4</sup> It is a middle mile project, which means that Clearwave has laid the platform for other installers to finish the last few miles to residents’ homes.

The \$45.4 million in funding comes from federal, state, and private funds, \$31.5 million of it from federal grants, much of it stimulus money from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA).<sup>5</sup> The project is scheduled to be completed by August 2013; about one-third of the communities are already connected.

A smaller project, funded by \$8.4 million in federal and state grants, is for Shawnee Telephone to provide broadband access to more than 2,100 households and 420 businesses. The network will allow for transmission speeds of 100 Mbps for the entire area. Currently, 40 percent of the households lack access to broadband and none has access at 5 Mbps. Because 60 percent of the households do not own computers, Shawnee will offer a free home computer and discounted service plans to qualifying low-income households.<sup>6</sup> The last mile project, so called because it will bring the network right up to residents’ homes, is almost completed.

A third project will bring wireless connectivity to the village of Cobden (population 1,150) and the surrounding area. One possible option is a small wireless array to be fixed to the water tower in Giant City State Park that will provide broadband for many miles. Cobden particularly needs internet access because it is at the heart of the Shawnee Hills wine trail. The area’s 13 wineries had 176,000 visitors in 2010. “That’s a very big economic engine for our community and our county,” says Alan Eddington, executive director of the Union County Economic Development Corporation. The project is expected to be completed by mid-2013.

Escape Locally promotes the region’s tourism business through a new website, [Escapelocally.com](http://Escapelocally.com), which allows visitors to book all the stops on their trip, including bed and breakfasts, restaurants, wineries (there are 32 in the region), and limos. The site informs tourists about small local crafts businesses that do not have the resources to create their own site to sell their wares.

The effort to expand broadband connectivity is starting to attract businesses. National Electronics Warranty (NEW), based in Lovettsville, Va., hired 200 students in Southern Illinois to work from home to handle the company’s inbound customer service calls. At the announcement, NEW said that Southern Illinois clearly understands the importance of broadband access.

## Health Care

Connect SI's health care initiatives meet the group's two criteria of furthering broadband connectivity and fostering regional collaboration. "Connect SI was one of the first to recognize what a huge economic engine health care was," says Lively. "Most people think of it as a service." These projects reflect both qualities.

## Southern Illinois Online Nursing Initiative

In an effort to address the shortage of registered nurses in Southern Illinois and to keep licensed practical nurses in the area, Connect SI launched the Southern Illinois Online Nursing Initiative (SIONI) in 2009. It was another project funded by federal stimulus money, awarded through the U.S. Department of Labor to the Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity's Critical Skills Shortage Initiative. Six community colleges spread over several counties joined together to offer online classes that would enable LPNs to become RNs.

"A lot have day jobs and couldn't get their schedule worked out to go back to school," says Carol Belt, then director of nursing at Shawnee Community College and now coordinator of the program. Connect SI persuaded the employers to help pay tuition if the LPNs agreed to stay in their jobs for another year or two. The online program also helped combat the barrier of distance, as the community colleges are spread out and most students lived at least 30 miles away.

The theory portion of the course is completely online. Students come to their home campus one evening a week to take tests and conduct lab practice. Each student has a clinical rotation every

other weekend. The colleges work in pairs to teach two groups of students, so each college teaches every other theory course." That allowed the instructors to share ideas and knowledge and allowed the colleges to share instructors and costs," says Belt.

The program, now in its third year, has graduated 62 nurses eligible to sit for their RN license. Of the six colleges, two decided that they would best serve their needs by focusing on their own on-line curriculum. Another, John A. Logan College, had enough interested faculty and students to develop a program based on its own calendar. The other three are offering the program together to 30 students starting in August 2012. Each student has the use of a laptop (bought with the grant money) during the program. SIONI is becoming financially more self-sufficient as the colleges pay much of the expense.

## Delta Simulation Learning Lab

Connect SI is using a Delta Regional Simulation and Learning Lab grant, from the U.S. Department of Agriculture

(USDA) Rural Development through its Rural Utilities Service, to buy simulation equipment for nurse training programs. The money will provide simulation mannequins and video conferencing equipment for community colleges and two elementary schools. A grant from the Delta Regional Authority will provide distance learning technology equipment. Southern Illinois Healthcare is working with John A. Logan College, which is providing space for the hospital to develop the training program so it can keep its own beds free for patient care. Healthcare professionals will be able to practice the techniques they are learning on dummies. The 6,000-square-foot classroom containing simulations of two hospital rooms and two surgical suites will open in January 2013.



## Health Information Exchange

The health care industry is moving toward online records and telemedicine, allowing electronic health records to be securely shared among providers (with the patient's consent) and even allowing remote diagnosis of certain conditions – especially helpful in rural areas where patients may be far from health care providers.

The Health Information Exchange (HIE) of Southern Illinois is part of a statewide initiative funded in part by a \$3 million grant from the Illinois Department of Healthcare and Family Services. Creation of the state's HIE is also supported by American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (ARRA), which dedicated more than \$20 billion nationwide through the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) to create electronic health records and health data exchange by 2014.

The aim is for electronic medical records in physicians' offices to connect to records in hospitals and other health care providers such as pharmacies. Patients will also be able to access their own records. Dozens of health care providers are involved, some of them used to competing rather than cooperating, says Woody Thorne, vice president of community affairs for Southern Illinois Healthcare. Connect SI was chosen as a neutral facilitator. In the initial phase, Connect SI worked with health care providers to secure their commitment to the project. As Illinois continues to develop the state plan the region work will continue.

## Child Health Program

In addition to attacking workforce training in health care through SIONI and an IT initiative through the Health Information Exchange, Connect SI was

the impetus for a third health care program designed to improve the health status of the region: CATCH, the Coordinated Approach to Child Health. Thorne sees a connection to economic development: "For employers and businesses to be successful, you need to have a healthy workforce," he says.

The program, funded by a grant from the HHS' Health Resources and Services Administration, focuses on ways to improve cardiovascular health, offering before- and after-school programs for third through eighth graders. Partnering with Southern Illinois University and area public health departments, the CATCH program works with school faculty, staff and administration to integrate health programs into the school environment.

One goal is to increase the amount of time the children spend exercising. Just from 2008 to 2011, the amount of time the students spent in physical education classes engaging in moderate to strenuous physical activity rose from 49 percent to 69 percent. The children were also educated about the benefits of exercise.

In the second part of the program, CATCH helps school food service staff to redesign their menus and tries to connect the schools with local growers. The program has worked with 40 school districts and held two food service summits. "Some of these kids live in an impoverished area," says Thorne. "The food they get in school may be the only two meals they get each day. So it's really important we find a means of improving on that diet."





## Agriculture

Although Connect SI's main areas of focus initially have been broadband and health care, agriculture was in the mix as an economic driver for the region since the group first initiated cluster studies. The topic was given new impetus with the state General Assembly's creation of the Illinois Local Food, Farms and Jobs Council and its report saying that it is feasible for 20 percent of food served in state-funded institutions to be locally sourced by 2020.

But it is hard to make the local foods movement, with its small farms and specialty crops, part of agriculture as an economic driver in the state, says Stephanie Brown, Connect SI's agriculture, energy and natural resources liaison. "Our primary role is to serve as a neutral convener of various interests in local food production," says Brown, "and to serve as a bridge to the economic development community." To that end, she works with Food Works (a small nonprofit group that provides

farmer training), the Farm Bureau, community colleges, and small business development centers. The University of Illinois Extension Service is also a critical partner.

The state has some distance to go to meet the goal of 20 percent locally sourced food; the figure is currently about 2 percent. "Most of our commodity crops are exported from the region," says Brown. Although she is working with the Farm Bureau to help growers, they cannot currently produce crops on the scale needed to meet institutional demand.

Brown has organized a sustainable living expo, A Country Boy Can Survive Meets The Victory Garden, for each of the past two years. The event has ties to both the traditional and nontraditional sides of agriculture, and Connect SI is a major sponsor.

The next step in the agriculture initiative will be asset mapping, showing who is

growing what, and where. One piece of that will be finding the vacant facilities where growers could bring their food and pool it for distribution.

## Lead SI

When Lively and Bryce Cramer, district office manager for the Egyptian Electric Cooperative, met with community leaders several years ago, they found that the region was losing its most talented young people after they graduated from high school. A former Southern Illinois resident, recently retired General Counsel for Goldman Sachs, had the vision for a leadership program that would help the area's youth develop leadership skills. Cramer then led a Connect SI team and worked with Southern Illinois University to create a youth leadership program, and in 2008, SIU held the first Lead SI Institute. Over three full days, a group of specially selected 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> graders went to the SIU campus and participated in a program that helped them identify their strengths and develop leadership skills.



The program's main purpose is to give young people leadership skills and introduce them to a network of other young people who are leaders in the region so they can explore local opportunities. But even if they move away, they can retain local ties.

"If we have one of the brightest or best and they have the opportunity to go to Harvard, the last thing we want to do is try to keep them in Southern Illinois," says Cramer. "We want them to understand, the knowledge that I have can still have an influence on Southern Illinois especially with the improved broadband access."

Throughout the year, the Lead SI students have opportunities to talk to leaders at locally owned businesses, which include Pepsi MidAmerica, auto parts manufacturer Aisin, and agritourism venues such as Rendleman's Orchards and Blue Sky Winery. The aim is to expose the youngsters to leading local industries.

Including this year's class, 163 students have been through Lead SI. The program has been funded through the George A. Bates Memorial Foundation and donations from local industry. Continued funding, says Cramer, remains the "biggest obstacle."

## Shared online tools: Research 360

Connect SI received a grant from the U.S. Economic Development Administration (EDA) to acquire Research 360, a Web-based tool to sort demographic data. Each of the four regional planning and development commissions received a one-year subscription. Reports can include information on businesses from Dun and Bradstreet, with contact information and the ability to survey employers. The planning commissions provide staff time in return for use of the service.



## Connect SI's Energy Connection

Connect SI has offered public information sessions on coal, wind power, biofuels, solar, geothermal, and electrical demand devices. The most recent session was on "Municipal Electric Demand Aggregation: Reducing your community's electrical usage rates."





## Funding

Connect SI has received a variety of grants from federal and state agencies and private foundations. Connect SI was awarded a three year contract through a competitive process and is funded at \$200,000; the Delta Regional Authority is a big supporter, as is the Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity. Federally, the Department of Labor and EDA have provided funding for specific initiatives. Many area hospitals and network providers have contributed support.

One secret is volunteers: the executive directors of the four regional planning commissions now sit on the Connect SI board. "They understand the regional benefits," says Lively.

In the beginning, Connect SI used a collaborative funding model where many of the entities that stood to benefit from the organization's work—banks, health

care systems, network providers, some counties and economic development organizations—helped fund it. To find continued funding, Lively plans to go back to some of the same organizations and also appeal to different groups in the same sectors.

## Regional planning commissions' role

Regional planning commissions benefit from the regional scope of Connect SI. "The things that Connect SI are working on – broadband, health care – are in my CEDS," says Minnis. "By collaborating, we leverage their resources and assets to help reach the goals in our CEDS. Connect SI has been very successful in doing broadband implementation. There's not a lot of reason for me to go out on my own and do broadband."

Sarah Mann, executive director of the Greater Wabash Regional Planning and

Development Commission, has found networking through Connect SI an excellent way to stay in touch with other regional planning commissions. Greater broadband access will have a "huge impact on the economy" in her region, says Mann. Her constituents have been able to take advantage of SIONI and Lead SI.

## A model for other regions?

Connect SI's focus on broadband connectivity "is a single thrust that everyone can rally around," says SIU president Poshard. "It is the future of our country, of our region." Even in a shaky economic climate, Southern Illinois has succeeded in attracting network providers to some very rural parts of the state. The urgent shared need has fostered a collaboration that did not exist before.



## Endnotes

- 1 "2004 Report on Illinois Poverty: An Analysis of Rural Poverty," Heartland Alliance, <http://www.heartlandalliance.org/whatwedo/advocacy/reports/2004-report-on-illinois-rural.html>.
- 2 National Telecommunications Cooperative Association, <http://www.ntca.org/current-press-releases/broadband-deployment-in-rural-america-continues-to-rise.html>
- 3 The four regional planning commissions involved are also designated as Economic Development Administration (EDA), Economic Development Districts (EDDs) and Delta Regional Authority (DRA) Local Development Districts (LDDs).
- 4 Megabytes per second/gigabytes per second
- 5 Partnership for a Connected Illinois, Illinois Broadband Opportunities Partnership – Southern, <http://broadbandillinois.org/Projects/Illinois-Broadband-Opportunities-Partnership-Southern.html>.
- 6 Partnership for a Connected Illinois, Shawnee Telephone, <http://broadbandillinois.org/Projects/Shawnee-Telephone.html>.

## We thank all the individuals who provided information and images, and those who consented to be interviewed:

- **Carol Belt, Coordinator**  
Southern Illinois Online Nursing Initiative
- **Stephanie Brown, Agriculture, Energy and Natural Resources Liaison**  
Connect SI
- **Bryce Cramer, District Office Manager**  
Egyptian Electric Cooperative
- **Alan Eddington, Executive Director**  
Union County Economic Development Corporation
- **Kathy Lively, Executive Director**  
Connect SI Foundation
- **Sarah Mann, Executive Director**  
Greater Wabash Regional Planning and Development Commission
- **Cary Minnis, Executive Director**  
Greater Egypt Regional Planning and Development Commission
- **Woody Thorne, Vice President of Community Affairs**  
Southern Illinois Healthcare
- **Dr. Glenn Poshard, President**  
Southern Illinois University at Carbondale



## About NADO and the NADO Research Foundation

The National Association of Development Organizations (NADO) is a membership organization for the national network of over 520 regional development organizations (RDOs) focused on strengthening local governments, communities, and economies through regional strategies, partnerships, and solutions.

Founded in 1988, the NADO Research Foundation is the nonprofit research affiliate of NADO. The NADO Research Foundation identifies, studies, and promotes regional solutions and approaches to improving local prosperity and services through the nationwide network of RDOs. The Research Foundation shares best practices and offers professional development training, analyzes the impact of federal policies and programs on RDOs and their local communities, and examines the latest developments and trends in small metropolitan and rural America. Most importantly, the Research Foundation is helping bridge the communications gap among practitioners, researchers, and policy makers.



**This report was authored by Joan Mooney with support from the Delta Regional Authority under grant number RW-0183. Any opinions, findings and conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this publication are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of DRA or the NADO Research Foundation.**

### **Connect SI**

[www.connectsi.us](http://www.connectsi.us)

### **Egyptian Electric Cooperative**

[www.eeca.coop](http://www.eeca.coop)

### **Greater Egypt Regional Planning and Development Commission**

[www.greateregypt.org](http://www.greateregypt.org)

### **Greater Wabash Regional Planning Commission**

[www.gwrpc.com](http://www.gwrpc.com)

### **Southeastern Illinois Regional Planning and Development Commission**

[www.sirpdc.org](http://www.sirpdc.org)

### **Southern Five Regional Planning District and Development Commission**

[www.southernfive.org](http://www.southernfive.org)

### **Southern Illinois Healthcare**

[www.sih.net](http://www.sih.net)

### **Southern Illinois Online Nursing Initiative**

[www.connectsi.us/healthcare\\_sioni.htm](http://www.connectsi.us/healthcare_sioni.htm)

### **Southern Illinois University at Carbondale**

[www.siu.edu](http://www.siu.edu)

### **Union County Economic Development Corporation**

[www.unioncountybiz.net](http://www.unioncountybiz.net)

REGIONAL STRATEGIES. PARTNERSHIPS. SOLUTIONS.

---



**NADO**  
NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF DEVELOPMENT ORGANIZATIONS  
**RESEARCH FOUNDATION**

400 North Capitol Street, NW, Suite 390  
Washington, DC 20001  
202.624.7806

[Info@nado.org](mailto:Info@nado.org)  
[www.Nado.org](http://www.Nado.org)  
[www.RuralTransportation.org](http://www.RuralTransportation.org)