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As rural Illinois works to overcome the challenges brought about by the recession, community leaders must adjust their strategies to take advantage of new opportunities. More than 300 elected officials and community leaders from around Illinois and neighboring states recently participated in 23rd Annual Rural Community Economic Development Conference which provided new insights into the strategies needed in today's economic development environment. The conference was hosted by the Illinois Institute for Rural Affairs in conjunction with the Governor's Rural Affairs Council, chaired by Lt. Governor Sheila Simon, and Rural Partners.

Lt. Governor Sheila Simon opened the conference and discussed how local communities were doing more with less. Simon stated that Illinois is making great progress in the areas of broadband access and local foods and emphasized the need for rural communities to collaborate on solutions to the challenges they face. David Oppendahl from the Federal Reserve Bank of Chicago discussed the role of agriculture in the Midwest's rural economy and David Terrell, Deputy Chief of State for the Lt. Governor of Indiana presented information on the Stellar Communities Program, a multi-agency partnership designed to fund comprehensive community development projects in small communities in Indiana.

Breakout sessions included presentations on the effective use of TIF programs, downtown redevelopment, historic preservation, local foods, and involving youth in community development. Additional sessions featured the Wisconsin Innovation Kitchen, a commercial kitchen owned and operated by a center supporting people with disabilities; local foods, connecting rural hospitals with broadband. Don Macke from the Center for Rural Entrepreneurship discussed the use of wealth transfer and community foundations to support entrepreneurship.

"This rural development conference offers an opportunity for elected officials and leaders in small Illinois communities to hear new ideas and approaches. The Illinois Institute for Rural Affairs is proud to provide this opportunity for local leaders to learn from their peers on these important topics." said Christopher D. Merrett, IIRA director.

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