

**PURPOSE AND NEED STATEMENT  
ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AND ENHANCED QUALITY OF LIFE PROJECT  
NORTHEAST MADISON COUNTY, MISSISSIPPI**

**June 16, 2006**

**INTRODUCTION**

Madison County, Mississippi has great contrasts in economic activity and quality of life amenities. As a whole, Madison County is a stellar example of accelerated economic growth balanced with a very high quality of life. However, most of the economic development has occurred in Southern Madison County. In contrast, Northeast Madison County (NMC) has suffered from economic stagnation and decline. NMC's economic challenges can be attributed to numerous factors, including poor highway access, limited drinking water supplies, inadequate fire protection, no wastewater facilities, average performing schools, no vocational training facilities, limited employment opportunities, limited residential development, limited retail commercial development, no significant manufacturing facilities, and few public parks or recreational facilities. As a result, residents of NMC have had minimal benefits from the economic advances experienced by Southern Madison County residents. Notwithstanding these issues, privately funded economic growth is slowly expanding into Northeast Madison County. The area is seeing a scattering of new housing starts, some new businesses, and property values have begun to rise. Still, private development without publicly funded infrastructure can not and will not provide an integrated response to NMC's diverse needs.

**PURPOSE**

A clear plan and publicly funded infrastructure are critical to guide, facilitate and accelerate economic development in NMC, while preserving and enhancing the area's unique quality of life. In addition, this plan must be inextricably integrated with an enhanced educational system in NMC (including bridging activities between secondary and post-secondary education/training). During a series of public meetings in NMC, several different large-scale public or public/private development alternatives were proposed or discussed, including

- Airport/industrial park/distribution center
- Technology/job training facility
- Vocational/technical training facility
- Multi-purpose lake or a series of smaller lakes
- Public/private hunting/fishing preserve or a series of smaller preserves
- Equestrian Center/Harness racing facility

These alternatives are still being considered pending the completion of a preliminary Economic Feasibility Analysis. However, after careful consideration and considerable public input, a multi-use/multi-purpose surface water impoundment or series of smaller impoundments is envisioned as the most viable publicly and/or privately promoted economic development catalyst for NMC. Many, if not all, of the individual alternatives identified above could be integrated as "spokes" with a lake or series of smaller lakes serving as the economic development engine for the area.

Recognizing the quality of life concerns, the lake/s should be developed as a public/private partnership amenity and include such water-based developments as waterfront parks, docks, fishing piers, marinas, and boat ramps. The lake/s would be managed for family recreation and enjoyment including primary and secondary contact recreation (e.g. recreational boating, fishing, and swimming). This will require the lakes' water quality to be maintained at the highest possible level. Based on public sentiment, the majority of the land-area around the lake/s should remain in private ownership except for a small, publicly owned buffer strip. Complementary land-based developments which could be either public or privately owned would include cabins, campgrounds, a picnic area and a pavilion for local events, and similar amenities.

Finally, there are a range of other facilities that could be closely associated with the lake/s but sited some distance away from it. Such developments could be largely or totally privately owned and could include mixed income residential areas, a small conference center, and complementary commercial establishments. Other potential developments that were identified above could also easily be included as "spokes" to highlight local interests and culture. Specific amenities could include an equestrian center (with horse boarding and training), a harness racing facility, or a museum or interpretive center on traditional life in rural Mississippi.

To address the educational enhancements and entrepreneurial bridging activities, a vocational/technology educational or training facility could also be linked to the lake project. In addition, a business incubator (separate from the commercial establishments) would help residents transition from training to business opportunities. Together these amenities should provide additional recreational and economic opportunities for NMC residents. Furthermore, these opportunities and amenities should empower and engage the areas youth and contribute to a lower crime rate in the area.

This project would clearly justify significant public (federal, state, and local) funding to improve and expand NMC's infrastructure. In addition, public funding could be heavily leveraged with private investment. Specific infrastructure improvements would include transportation to provide access to the project's various amenities; water, wastewater, communications and electrical utilities would also be upgraded in the area. Alternative wastewater management and treatment technologies will be evaluated based on their efficacy and cost. Improved infrastructure will be critical to the project's ability to recruit compatible light industries and commercial endeavors. Potential industrial and business demands for surface water supply will be considered to determine if the lake/s should be designed to meet long-term water demands and a suitable intake structure incorporated into a lake design if warranted.

A locally led Northern Madison County Economic Development Steering Committee will provide leadership on the project and coordinate closely with the Madison County Board of Supervisors, the Madison County Economic Development Authority, and project consulting team. To implement this project, it will be critical to minimize the actual project size (i.e., the total amount of property needed to build the lake and accompanying public amenities). However, to obtain the necessary environmental permits and guide development throughout northern Madison County, it will be necessary for the Steering Committee to embrace a much broader project area for an enforceable master plan to guide private development.

## **NEED**

Northeast Madison County is at a crossroads for both its future economic development and the quality of life for its citizens. Currently, NMC is mostly rural with minimal public water, wastewater, transportation, communications, or fire protection infrastructure. The public school

system struggles to achieve balanced cultural ethnicity and does not provide any public post-secondary training or educational opportunities in the growing vocational and technical fields. Also, like many rural areas, NMC has few public recreational amenities. As a result, NMC has had relatively few new housing starts, has a declining and aging population, and provides very few employment opportunities. Recognizing these conditions, it is not surprising that NMC has not yet attracted the private investment needed to create employment in high-paying retail, commercial, vocational, or technical fields. Many residents have long histories in the area and enjoy its current rural setting despite its limited economic opportunities.

**However, change is coming to NMC.** Economic and population growth is slowly edging northward into NMC. Property values, and consequently property taxes are already gradually increasing. Without a clear economic development plan, this growth will overtax NMC's limited infrastructure and likely necessitate additional tax increases to enhance and expand that infrastructure to meet the demands of private development. Similarly, population increases will either overtax the public school system or use private schools which will further impede obtaining diverse cultural ethnicity in the schools. Finally, privately funded development will not provide public amenities, services or opportunities to NMC's current residents.

Recognizing this crossroad, the Madison County Economic Development Authority (MCEDA) initiated an economic development study in November 2005 to; a) assess the current social and economic conditions in NMC, b) seek input from the public on the needs in the area, and c) develop a strategy to improve the economic welfare of the residents. That study included an extensive public participation process to actively seek input from the local residents on what, if anything needed to be done to address NMC's economic challenges.

Based on the input received from the residents in the area, there seems to be general agreement that something needs to be done to promote economic development and enhance the quality of life for the residents in the area. Key needs reiterated in numerous public meetings are a) the residents of NMC must be actively engaged in defining an economic development "Vision" for the area, b) publicly financed capital infrastructure must be closely integrated with enhanced educational opportunities that seek to actively promote ethnic diversity, and c) local citizens strongly desire some type of "bridging" activity that will link post-secondary educational activities with specialized business or entrepreneurial training. Accordingly, there is a critical need to ensure that:

1. Economic development is compatible with the unique quality of life enjoyed by residents of Northeast Madison County;
2. Growth and development are guided and accelerated by public investment in critical infrastructure (water, wastewater, roads and communication systems, etc);
3. Benefits from and participation in any future economic development will be optimized for local residents by actively engaging and enhancing all levels of education in northern Madison County.