



Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity

Rod R. Blagojevich, Governor / Jack Lavin, Director

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Opportunity Returns: Blagojevich Announces Third Regional Economic Development Plan

Coal, Agriculture And Tourism Industries Are Top Priority In Governor'S Proactive Plan To Create Jobs And Spur Economic Growth In Southern Illinois



OFFICE OF THE GOVERNOR
ROD R. BLAGOJEVICH - GOVERNOR

NEWS

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Coal, agriculture and tourism industries are top priority in Governor's proactive plan to create jobs and spur economic growth in Southern Illinois

CARBONDALE – Speaking before a crowd of business leaders, school officials and students at Southern Illinois University Carbondale, Governor Rod Blagojevich this afternoon unveiled the third of 10 new major economic initiatives to spur growth in the region and across the state. The Governor's plan, *Opportunity Returns*, is the most aggressive, comprehensive approach to create jobs to date in Illinois. The plan is a product of outreach over the past several months to the region, with business, civic and labor leaders and government officials.

"When I was sworn in as Governor, Illinois was in the midst of its worst economic downturn since the Great Depression," Blagojevich said. "Every community and most working people were suddenly faced with the uncertainty of what tomorrow might bring."

"It's now time we try to do something and not just wait for the economy to turn around or for Washington to act. We need to stop taking a one size fits all approach to the economy and start doing things that are targeted specifically to help communities throughout Southern Illinois. The plan I'm announcing today is designed so it will be effective and deliver real results that local businesses need. It is meant to make a difference," Blagojevich continued.

The Governor's *Opportunity Returns* plan for Southern Illinois consists of six primary goals to address the economic and workforce development needs of the region: modernize and expand local business, improve local infrastructure, strengthen education and job training, support the coal industry and the use of renewable fuel, promote regional tourism, and assist entrepreneurs and small business.

The Southern Illinois region includes Alexander, Edwards, Franklin, Gallatin, Hamilton, Hardin, Jackson, Jefferson, Johnson, Massac, Perry, Pope, Pulaski, Saline, Union, Wabash, Wayne, White, and Williamson counties. The region contains nearly 400,000 residents, about 3 percent of the state's population, but accounts for 13 percent of the land area in Illinois including the Shawnee National Forest.

Unemployment in the Southern region has historically been very high, but despite that the region has a diverse economic base, and a diverse workforce. Health care, education, retail and manufacturing are the largest areas of employment, and small businesses (fewer than 100 employees) account for 98% of the local businesses.

The Governor announced several major initiatives to counter job loss and spur economic development in Southern Illinois including:

- To help relieve traffic congestion and aid in the growth of local business, the plan will widen Illinois Route 13 from four to six lanes between Marion and Carterville. It is a \$51 million project.
- Building the case for FutureGen – the ten year, \$1 billion project to create the world's first coal-based, zero emissions power plant --including amending state laws to create financial incentives to attract the project.
- \$2.1 million for a feasibility study to expand facilities at SIUC and create the Transportation Education Center at Southern Illinois Airport. The new center will combine all the automotive technology and aviation related academic programs into one advanced facility.
- Creating a Tourism and Hospitality Training Program with a consortium of community colleges, including SIUC, Rend Lake College, Shawnee Community College, Illinois Eastern Community Colleges, South Eastern Community College, and John A. Logan College. The consortium will develop and operate a set of comprehensive, nationally recognized tourism and hospitality education programs to spur the growth of tourism in Southern Illinois.

- Developing the new SIUC Entrepreneurship Center, which will serve as an umbrella organization to coordinate all available small business services and programs and provide targeted, accelerated services to companies with high growth potential.
- Building the Metropolis Regional Educational Center at Shawnee Community College.
- Supporting value-added Agriculture - key to ensuring that southern Illinois farmers prosper for generations. Gov. Blagojevich will award AgriFIRST grants to agribusiness ventures in the southern region to assist in their efforts to grow and expand.
- Establishing the Coal Competitiveness Grant Program – intended to keep Illinois coal companies investing in their mines to retain good-paying jobs.
- Improving Davidson Drive, Wells Bypass and Potomac Boulevard in Mt. Vernon.
- Targeting state grant and loan funds to various communities in the southern region that need water and sewer systems upgrades.

Opportunity Returns is the blueprint to spur economic development in Southern Illinois and across the state," said Governor Blagojevich. "With each success, in each hard earned success we will build a better future; one job at a time, one company at a time, one family at a time. We will work day and night to put people back to work to create opportunity and economic security and when we do, we will make the great dream of building a better life as real and vibrant and alive as it was meant to be."

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