THE VALLEY QUARTERLY
June 2014 | 4th Quarter

REVOLVING LOAN FUND ASSISTS BUSINESSES

The River Valley Regional Commission Loan Committee has approved two revolving loans that will assist businesses in Georgetown and Columbus and create at least 21 new jobs in the region.

D & J Plastics received a $200,000 loan to expand its facility in Georgetown. D & J Plastics produces plastic fishing lures for customers all over the world. The expansion will add at least 10 full-time jobs.

The RVRC staff also completed and submitted an application on behalf of D & J Plastics for a $160,000 loan through the OneGA program, which the OneGeorgia Authority Board approved at its June 17 meeting.

M. Ali Kahn of Columbus will receive a $250,000 EDA loan to build a convenience store with attached laundry.

Transit system enables people to work
Each day eight employees at D & J Plastics use the Quitman Transit system. “It enables people to work who don’t have a license or vehicle,” said D & J Plastics CFO Joyce Montgomery. In addition to the local Quitman County employees, some of the employees from Eufaula, Alabama, and Clay County are also using the transit. “They are coming from further away than just Quitman County,” said Montgomery. “And, it helps them be on time for work.” The van arrives before the work day begins at 7 a.m. and there are afternoon pickups at 3 and 5. D & J Plastics employs 89 people and manufacturers plastic fishing lures.

From the Executive Director’s Desk...
Can you believe it has been five years since Lower Chattahoochee and Middle Flint Regional Development Centers merged to become the River Valley Regional Commission? For me, personally, it has been a very rewarding five years.

I know each of us had our doubts that the merger would work and that it could possibly be the demise of Regional Planning Agencies as we had known them. But the two previous organizations came together as a much stronger, more relevant, more visible agency.

We have been able to grow our existing programs, create new programs and more effectively serve our communities. Much of this has been done because of the strong and committed council members we have from our 16-county area. These council members do not just come to our monthly meetings; they encourage their counties, cities and other organizations to use the services of the Regional Commission whenever possible.

The last five years have brought many challenges and I am sure we will face many in the future but just know that the staff of the River Valley Regional Commission is here to serve you, our local communities.

The staff and our council members will continue to evaluate our mission and programs in order to ensure we are planning for and enhancing our economic competitiveness in order to provide for a better quality of life and to create a robust region! I look forward to the next five years.

Patti
Celebrate Older Americans Month

For Older Americans Month (May), the GeorgiaCares Program assisted the Retired Seniors Volunteer Program with their yearly picnic at Cooper Creek Park in Columbus. Pictured are Alice Brewer of RSVP, Shameika Averett of GeorgiaCares, Chandra Wilson of Georgia Legal Services and Raven Allred of Convalescent Care.

The Middle Flint Council on Aging’s annual picnic had a Hollywood them with “stars” from around the 16-county area attending. The Elder Rights team performed a "red carpet" skit educating the seniors about abuse in nursing homes, financial exploitation, Adult Protective Services and Georgia Legal Services and whom to call for assistance. Pictured performing are: Cat Young, Long Term Ombudsman (Americus), Chandra Wilson and Shameika Averett.

Fresh produce for seniors

The River Valley ADRC is again participating in the Georgia Senior Farmer’s Market Nutrition Program. The program provides eligible seniors with checks to purchase fresh, nutritious, locally grown fruits, vegetables and herbs. This year we were allotted 563 vouchers to use at our 12 senior centers. Each senior receives a $20 voucher. Our local farmer, Reginald Brown, comes to each site so the seniors can redeem their vouchers. This program has been very successful in previous years as we have had a 100 percent redemption rate.

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facilities on Veterans Parkway in Columbus. At least 11 full-time jobs will be created.

The RVRC Council and its Loan Committee are very pleased to be able to assist these companies.

Anyone interested in obtaining information about a loan through our RLF programs may contact Sarah Walls or Katie Howard at (706) 256-2910.

Would you like to receive the RVRC newsletter via email?
Please send your contact information to manderson@rivervalleyrc.org
Riding into Spring

The RVRC staff had a busy spring assisting with several cycling events in the region.

The MidTown Bike Around scheduled on March 16 was delayed until March 23 due to rain. However, that didn’t dampen anyone’s enthusiasm and 70 people rode in this annual ride through the historic neighborhood. The ride featured sites included in the “Greetings from MidTown” postcard display at the Columbus Museum.

On May 3, 92 riders from around Georgia, as well as Florida, Alabama, Michigan and Washington, came to Americus for the 3rd Annual Prison to Peanuts Bicycle Adventure. This year the ride started at Lenny’s Market in downtown Americus, giving riders the opportunity to visit the farmer’s market and downtown businesses. Rest stops were set up in Plains, Andersonville, and Ellaville. When they returned to Americus, riders were treated with food and live music. This year’s ride included more route options – 13, 34, 65, and 105 miles – to accommodate riders of all levels.

The annual Bike to Work events were held the week of May 5. Columbus had several events scheduled during the week including a social ride on May 6 sponsored by Ride on Bikes, the Ride of Silence on May 7, and Bike to Work Day on Friday, May 9. Four energizing stations were set up Friday morning for people cycling or walking to work. The week concluded with the annual Ride with the Mayor Friday evening with Mayor Tomlinson leading a ride through Uptown and Midtown Columbus and ending at the Uptown RiverFest concert.

Several organizations in Columbus, including Aflac, TSYS and Fort Benning participated in Bike to Work Day and the RVRC provided cycling information and promotional items for their employees.

In Americus, an energizing station was set up at the Public Safety Building for riders and walkers on Bike to Work Day, May 9. At noon, Mayor Barry Blount led the annual Ride with the Mayor and joined riders for a free pizza party at Rylander Park.

During the event, Americus CAO Laura Lee Bernstein announced the city’s new bike share program with bike rentals available at the Americus Welcome Center on Lamar Street.

On April 26, RVRC and Sumter Cycling volunteers participated in the Americus Junior League’s Mighty Machines children’s safety expo and distributed 46 free bicycle helmets to children.

Population loss and gain in the River Valley Region

One of the questions we are frequently asked is about community population. Our regional total, as of the 2013 census estimate, was 378,887. This is a 2.2 percent increase in the overall regional population from the 2010 census count.

The whole picture looks different when you look at different counties and cities in the region. Some, like Harris County, continue to grow. Some cities and counties have seen declining numbers for several decades, while others currently have a relatively stable population base. However, those with a stable population base but an aging population may see future population declines.

The RVRC has created a resource book that includes population estimates by county, demographics, unemployment rates, job base and primary employment sector by county.

The resource book is available on the RVRC website: www.rivervalleyrc.org

Upcoming Events

- Oct. 18: Fair on the Square in Lumpkin
- Oct. 24-26: Columbus will be the host for the annual Bike Summit, bringing cyclists from around the state to the city.
- Nov. 7-9: Tour de Farm

Details will be posted on www.activevalley.org.
CARE-NET members learn about C.A.L.L.

The West Central Georgia CARE-NET held its bi-monthly meeting on May 27, 2014, at the River Valley Agency on Aging in Columbus. The guest speaker was George Nixon, president of the Columbus Academy for Lifelong Learning (C.A.L.L.), located at Columbus State University.

C.A.L.L. is structured toward seniors, or anyone with the time, who want to keep their body and mind engaged by actively pursuing knowledge and new experiences. This program provides exceptional respite opportunities for caregivers by way of interesting and informative classes, field trips, learning lunches, exercise and dance classes, and more.

Attending the West Central Georgia CARE-NET meeting (standing, from left) Linda Harris, Brenda DeRamus, guest speaker George Nixon, Lacey Pitts, Rochella Wright, Eboni Holder, Cynthia Moffet; (sitting) Dr. Rhonda Hollis, Lyshuarn Davis, and Paula Wright-Webb.

For more information, contact Linda Harris at 706-256-2939 or email lharris@rivervalleyrcaaa.org.

For more information on the C.A.L.L. program, contact Columbus State University’s Continuing Education Department at 706-507-8070.

Legislators Appreciation Luncheon

RVRC held its annual Legislators Appreciation Luncheon on May 28 at the Josh Gibson Family Resource Center in Buena Vista. Legislators were given the opportunity to speak about the legislative session and issues of importance in their districts and the River Valley region. RVRC staff members were recognized for their years of service to the agency (See photo on Page 8). Staff members also provided displays about the various programs and services the RVRC provides.
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SGTC Law Enforcement Director Brett Murray, Lou Crouch, and WIA participant Myeishia Biggins.

WIA participants graduate from SGTC Law Enforcement Academy

Two WIA program participants recently graduated from the South Georgia Technical College (SGTC) Law Enforcement Academy (LEA).

Myeishia Biggins, a resident of Americus (Sumter County) and Chester King from Cordele (Crisp County) successfully completed the intensive training of the academy. Myeishia Biggins was also the recipient of the Lou Crouch Law Enforcement Scholarship.

SGTC is one of six technical colleges in Georgia that offers the law enforcement training. The cadets undergo 18 weeks and more than 700 hundred hours of intensive mental and physical training. LEA graduates receive their POST (Peace Officer Standards and Training) certification as well as earning college credits that can be applied towards a diploma or associate degree in criminal justice.

Myeishia and Chester are currently seeking employment opportunities within the law enforcement field. SGTC’s WIA Coordinator Sandhya Muljibhai stated Myeishia and Chester were both great WIA participants and they look forward to their employment success in law enforcement.

Biggins awarded scholarship

WIA participant Myeishia Biggins was the recipient of the Lou Crouch Enforcement Scholarship.

Lou Crouch endowed the law enforcement scholarship to assist students enrolled in the LEA program at SGTC to become public servants and work as law enforcement officers in Georgia. Crouch volunteers with law enforcement officers around the state and is grateful for their service and dedication. “I am very pleased that I am able to give back to and help deserving law enforcement students,” Mr. Crouch said.

The WIA program was able to help Myeishia and other eligible participants with their training costs such as tuition, books, supplies, training apparel, and supportive services while they were engaged in training.

Myeishia is an excellent student and WIA participant who represents South Georgia Technical College and the Law Enforcement Academy well.

Congratulations LEA graduates and Myeishia on receiving the Lou Crouch Enforcement Scholarship.

Portillo selected for “Forty under 40” recognition

Julio Portillo, a community planner and regional bicycle-pedestrian planner for the RVRC, has been selected as one of Rural Leader Magazine’s “Forty under 40” for his dedication to service and community. He will be featured in the September edition of the magazine and will be recognized at a luncheon on Sept. 5 in Americus.
WIA participants attend SGTC GED graduation ceremony

WIA participants who have earned their General Education Diploma (GED) are given the opportunity to participate in the GED Graduation ceremony hosted by South Georgia Technical College Adult Literacy program. Paxen Learning Inc. (WIA Service Provider) for the GED Plus activity registered 65 WIA participants to march in the June 3, 2014, GED graduation ceremony.

This event allows individuals who have earned their GED to participate in a real-life graduation ceremony. Individuals who participate in this event get to feel the excitement, sense of personal achievement, and motivation to pursue additional educational opportunities.

Jan Hobgood (SGTC assistant vice president adult literacy), the adult literacy staff, and SGTC do a wonderful job hosting this annual event. It is a night to remember in the minds and hearts of the GED graduates and their families.

‘Finding your niche’ topic of Lunch and Learn

The City of Cordele hosted the latest Lunch and Learn on May 19. Angie Turner spoke on entrepreneurship and provided her unique perspective as a lawyer and as a creative entrepreneur.

“Know who you are serving,” Turner advised attendees. “Look for trends and unifying characteristics.”

In a small town, citizens, business owners, and elected officials have to wear several different hats to make things work in their communities.

However, the way information is processed has changed and will continue to change. Consequently, this changes the market and who the potential customers are.

Turner discussed how she found her niche as she transitioned from being a lawyer to creative entrepreneur and back to practicing law with a focus on creative businesses. As both a lawyer and entrepreneur she conducts much of her business online.

She also gave practical tips on ways to help business owners and professionals find their niche.
**Wills receives EMS award**

Dave Wills, government relations manager for the Association County Commissioners of Georgia, received the Northeast Georgia Region 2 EMS, Joe Lane Cox Excellence in EMS Award. The award was presented on May 22, 2014, at the Georgia Association of EMS Awards Banquet in Forsyth. The Joe Lane Cox Award is presented annually to an individual who has made substantial contributions to the promotion and advancement of EMS.

Wills is from Webster County, served on the Webster County Commission, and was a member and chairman of the Middle Flint Regional Development Center board of directors. He assisted in the merger of the Middle Flint and Lower Chattahoochee development centers, which is now the River Valley Regional Commission.

**Innovative Senior Solutions opens in new location**

Innovative Senior Solutions held an open house April 24 at its new corporate office on Lamar Street in Americus. The new location includes the CEO and COO offices, human resource department, and administrative staff offices. RVRC helped ISS get started with a revolving loan in 2010 to open an adult day health center in Cordele. Pictured are co-owners Eshonda Blue and Jessica Wright.

**Digital Economy Project**

The importance of web design

One of the recommendations forthcoming from the digital economy planning project will be to emphasize websites and e-commerce solutions to encourage more people to purchase goods and services from communities in the River Valley Region.

But building a website is not enough. If your website does not work with existing search engines, no one will find it. If the website is not appealing, or easy to navigate, people will leave quickly.

Design is important. Studies show consistently that we spend more time on sites that have a visually appealing design. Appearances do matter, at least on websites. Google research indicates people make those first-impression decisions in 50 milliseconds. That is .05 seconds, faster than a single movie frame at the movie theater.

Often quality over quantity makes the difference in visual design. Think Google homepage.

As local governments, chambers, and local businesses consider updating their websites or creating new websites, consider the design of the website as an important part of the discussion.

Article sources: “First Impressions Matter” (conversionxl.com); “Web users judge sites in the blink of an eye” (nature.com).

**Veterans Stand Down**

The AAA staff attended the Homeless Veterans and Female Stand Down at the Columbus Convention and Trade Center. Stand Downs are a part of the Department of Veterans Affairs’ efforts to provide homeless veterans with services such as food, shelter, clothing, health screenings, VA and Social Security benefits counseling. More than 1,000 local veterans attended this year’s event. Pictured are AAA staff Linda Harris, Shameika Averett, Bill Weathers and Marine Corps veteran Tom Zwaga.
RVRC Staff Awards

Executive Director Patti Cullen recognized staff members who have been with RVRC for five and 10 years at the Legislative Luncheon on May 28.

Rick Morris is the Columbus office planning director. He holds a bachelor’s degree in geography from Salisbury University and a Master of Science in planning from the University of Tennessee at Knoxville.

Shameika Averett is the AAA coordinator for GeorgiaCares. She has a Bachelor of Science degree in exercise science from Georgia State University.

Emily Chambers is the RVRC finance officer. She has a Bachelor of Arts degree in English and BBA in accounting, both from Columbus State University. She is a member of the Institute of Management Accountants, Government Finance Officers Association (GFOA), and Georgia GFOA.

Linda Harris is a case manager for AAA’s Home and Community Based Services. She also serves as the volunteer coordinator for Heart to Heart, a telephone reassurance program, and as coordinator for West Central Georgia CARE-NET. She holds a Bachelor of Arts degree in marketing, a Master of Public Admin-

Lance Renfrow is an environmental/GIS planner. He earned a bachelor’s degree in physics from the University of Georgia and a master’s in environmental science from Columbus State University.

Rochella Wright is an intake and referral specialist for AAA. She received her bachelor’s degree in sociology and obtained her master’s degree in public administration from Columbus State University.

Pictured are Lance Renfrow (5 years), Linda Harris (5 years), Rick Morris (10 years), Rochella Wright (5 years), Shameika Averett (5 years), and Emily Chambers (5 years).