

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY FOR BROWN COUNTY COMMUNITY ASSESSMENT STUDY**

### **Background and Methodology**

Established in 1997, The Tracy Family Foundation (TFF) offers resources to strengthen the family unit by focusing on needed youth, family, and community services. In 2005, TFF contracted The Medical Foundation (TMF) and the University of Illinois Extension-Adams/Brown County Unit (UIE) to undertake an effort to assess the strengths and needs of Brown County in a number of areas including youth concerns, education, families services, health and wellness, and community betterment. This effort aims to provide TFF and community decision-makers a comprehensive view of the needs and resources within Brown County, offer stakeholders current data to inform decision-making and planning, and give direction on future funding decisions.

Over an eight-month period (December 2004-July 2005), TMF and UIE staff reviewed existing data as well as conducted primary research. A community assessment process was implemented, which consisted of quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis, community input and review, and report development. To collect quantitative data, TMF and UIE compiled information from a variety of existing national, state, and county resources as well as administered a written survey to community members to assess their satisfaction level and priorities on a variety of community characteristics and services. Qualitative data helped explore community members' beliefs and attitudes in these areas and was collected through focus groups and interviews. In total, 12 focus groups with 70 individuals and 37 one-on-one interviews were completed with representatives of the Tracy family, TFF Trustees, Brown County youth, adults, elders, schools, churches, area non-profits, business owners and managers, key community leaders, and other community members.

### **Key Findings**

#### Population Characteristics

Over the last two decades, Brown County's population has remained rather stable, with a total of 5,007 people in 2000. The "baby boomer" age groups (40-49 year olds and 50-64 year olds) currently dominate the demographic profile, making up nearly 31% of the population. The numbers of people in these age groups increased from 1990 to 2000. However, in the same period of time, the population in the 22-29 year old and 30-39 year old age groups significantly decreased.

While in 1990, Brown County income levels lagged behind the Western Illinois Region, they increased significantly in recent years. In 2000, Brown County median household income exceeded that of the Western Illinois Region (\$35,563 vs. \$34,990). From 1990

to 2000, income growth in Brown County surpassed the Region and Illinois for all income indicators except non-family median income.

### Economic Development

As with so many rural communities in Illinois and across the country, Brown County's downtown business district looks much different than it did 20 years ago. Yet, Brown County has one of the most robust economies in rural Illinois today because of the influence of DOT Foods and the Western Illinois Regional Correctional Center. Economic development is currently a top priority for residents. More than two-thirds of survey respondents considered supporting and expanding existing businesses and promoting new retail businesses and agriculture as high priorities for the County. Residents also considered bolstering the community's commitment to local, existing businesses and increasing the variety of small business in the community as important issues to emphasize. Two major challenges to realizing these economic development goals exist: 1) young people seem to be leaving the County to pursue educational or employment opportunities and are not returning, and 2) many workers perceive a lack of diversity in the job opportunities available due to the few employers in the area.

### Schools and Education

Improving schools and youth services are important priorities for Brown County residents, yet data show that per pupil school expenditures and test scores in Brown County are below state averages. While community members believed that schools were safe for teachers and students, they were less likely to perceive Brown County schools as strong in academic rigor, college preparation, cultural activities, and technology and vocational programs. While many residents hope that academic standards and extracurricular programs will improve, the declining school enrollment and lack of money in the schools are major obstacles. To achieve school goals, it seems important to increase community involvement and raise expectations of teachers, parents, and students.

### Health

Similar to other rural counties in Illinois, the most significant risk factors facing Brown County residents are obesity, smoking, and alcohol use and the population's leading causes of death are heart disease, cerebrovascular disease (stroke), and cancer. The quality of and access to health care services are of great concern for community members. Residents cited a need for more providers, programs, and specialists within the County and for programs to address prevention and treatment of chronic diseases. While many existing health and medical services were seen as valuable assets in the County, "supporting and expanding health care services" was still considered an extremely high priority for residents.

### Housing

Residents hoped for better quality, diversity, and affordability of residential housing for purchase and, especially, for rental. While resources such as Brown County Development Corporation, Great River Economic Development Foundation, and County Financial Institutions exist to help the housing situation, many residents believed that local

developers are not willing to assume the risk of developing new housing stock or of repairing existing facilities.

### Youth and Youth Involvement

Youth services and concerns were among the highest ranked priorities in the list of community improvement issues. The top priorities included developing strategies for retaining youth in the county, improving the school system, and providing services. While many residents believed that Brown County was a good place to raise children, they also cited a number of concerns which might hinder developing additional youth programs. Some people believed that many young people lack the desire to participate in programs, are too busy, or do not receive enough parental involvement in their lives.

### Family, Senior, and Social Services

Brown County residents expressed concerns about access to needed family and social services. Approximately two-thirds of survey respondents (64%) rated “making sure families in need can find services” as a high priority for the community. One significant barrier in this area was the lack of transportation many residents faced in trying to seek out services. The transportation problem is exacerbated even more with the recent move of the Department of Human Services office to outside of the County. Residents also mentioned the quality of and lack of childcare facilities and adult education opportunities as significant concerns to them.

Even with the decrease in the senior population, improving services for the elderly also is important for County residents. Both elderly and non-elderly community members alike ranked “expanding services for senior citizens” as a high priority. Today, Brown County seniors depend heavily on their friends and neighbors for support and services which allow them to stay in their own homes, conduct daily activities, and obtain greater access to social and medical services. In addition to a strong support network, seniors noted that there is a need for more services for financially-needy individuals, for those living alone and not eligible for a nursing home, and for those facing transportation difficulties.

### Community Services and Betterment

Overall, residents appear happy with the quality of services provided by community and governmental agencies, such as fire protection, ambulance, and library services. Parks and recreation facilities and law enforcement received more mixed reviews. Transportation services received the lowest marks, with fewer than one-third survey respondents feeling satisfied with them. Residents mentioned that services need to be expanded and made more accessible.

Brown County community improvement efforts such as the improved library services, organized activities in the community pools, and the YMCA facility have also garnered positive reactions from residents. Many community events such as the Deer Classic have been successful, while others have not. As some community events have struggled, so have the service clubs in the area. Membership in clubs such as the Lions has declined in the past years. Even with seemingly declining community involvement, most residents had positive attitudes about Brown County as a place to live. While people are optimistic

about the County's future, residents wish for changes in the area's appearance and services. Many community members are concerned about the uncompleted emergency services facility and the inaccessibility of some public buildings to residents. Additionally, residents believed that some property owners are not concerned about the appearance of the community.

Increased opportunities for family-friendly recreation was also important to Brown County residents. While the County currently has many assets including the lake, YMCA, parks, the pool, and hunting lodges, residents are looking for more diverse recreational activities in Brown County that involve the arts, culture, retail, and outdoor opportunities. People believed that it was important to improve already existing facilities at the same time as attracting more retail stores and restaurants.

## **Recommendations**

Based on the analysis of quantitative and qualitative data collected from archival data, community assessments, focus groups, interviews, and surveys, TMF and UIE developed a set of recommendations in each topic area, although many recommendations are overlapping. This information is intended to inform key community stakeholders in future decision-making and planning for Brown County. We believe that implementing many of these recommendations outlined below, while working in partnership with community leaders and members, will more effectively address the needs of Brown County. It is our hope that these recommendations will continue to mobilize key community leaders to build upon existing community assets to address issues in a multifaceted, coordinated approach. The recommendations in the following areas include:

### Economic Development

- Encourage small business development with a revolving loan fund
- Encourage initiatives to support and retain existing businesses
- Support the expansion of the TIF district in Mt. Sterling
- Support partnerships with businesses and organizations providing family entertainment
- Work with DOT Foods to find ways to stay and grow in Brown County
- Work with DOT, C&L Tiling, and other major employers to attract complementary businesses to locate in Brown County
- Explore ways to increase usage of the Mt. Sterling airport, perhaps targeting new businesses that might utilize it
- Involve existing businesses in strategizing and recruiting new businesses
- Continue efforts around business retention programming
- Investigate potential value of Mt. Sterling applying for Main Street Illinois affiliation
- Encourage building improvements and beautification of Mt. Sterling's downtown district with a loan or grant program

### Schools and Education

- Support sustainable initiatives for student-centered, student-led learning

- Support programs in the fine arts, music, sciences, college prep, and vocational education
- Continue collaborations with John Wood Community College and others to provide additional opportunities for adult education and diverse educational opportunities for youth
- Support adult literacy and math programs
- Work with schools to explore ways to recruit and retain teachers
- Upgrade school-based technology and support technology programs for students
- Explore partnerships and ways to involve larger community to become involved in education system

#### Health and Medical Services

- Increase community access to health education information
- Increase health screening opportunities
- Increase individual physical activity
- Expand existing nutrition education programs
- Encourage collaborative programs between health and medical providers and the schools
- Encourage the provision of health and medical services within Brown County

#### Housing

- Encourage an innovative and tailored housing program through partnerships with DOT Foods (and other employers), Mt. Sterling and Brown County governments, USDA, and County banks
- Include housing as part of any discussion around expanding or creating new TIF District
- Survey commuters to identify reasons why they commute rather than move to Brown County; use findings to create program addressing concerns, as possible or feasible

#### Youth and Youth Involvement

- Encourage and create more opportunities for youth leadership within the community including serving on local boards
- Continue to support athletic programs and support arts and other after school/evening programs
- Create/designate a safe place for youth to “hang out”
- Create a mentoring program with the young professionals group

#### Family, Senior, and Social Services

- Encourage the creation of a central site to host social service providers, accommodating the need of possible recipients for anonymity and confidentiality
- Expand collaborations between senior programs, YMCA, and health and medical professionals
- Explore and develop adequate transportation to services and resources currently available inside and outside of Brown County

### Community Services and Betterment

- Provide training and support for local elected officials
- Encourage and create more opportunities for community adult and youth leadership
- Encourage building improvements and beautification of Mt. Sterling's historic downtown district with a loan or grant program
- Support the creation/rehab of local community centers in other Brown County municipalities such as Versailles, Ripley, and Timewell.
- Support the expansion of the Mt. Sterling library in Mt. Sterling and branches in Ripley, Timewell, and Versailles
- Incorporate service learning programming into the schools
- Expand volunteer opportunities, encouraging all county residents to contribute some amount of time annually for community events and activities
- Expand knowledge and use of County website to promote community betterment activities

### Recreation and Entertainment

- Support partnerships with businesses and organizations providing family entertainment
- Support trail and walking path development to connect recreational facilities
- Support the development of sustainable recreational activities