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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT CRUCIAL TO COUNTY'S FUTURE

Cross County Chamber/EDC creates program to build leaders

WYNNE – A leadership program developed last fall by the Cross County Chamber of Commerce is addressing a crucial need, according to the organization's executive director.

Aaron Stewart, Cross County Chamber of Commerce and Economic Development Corp. Executive Director, said that creating leaders for the future is one of the key elements of a good economic development strategy in rural America.

"The type of leadership that a community or region has is a prime factor that decision makers look at when it comes to economic development projects," said Stewart. "Whether an existing company plans to expand or a new company wants to move to town, leadership in the community is very important. It is one of the top three things that site location consultants look at when making their final decision."

Citing the need for Cross County to have its own leadership program, Stewart began initial discussions of how to organize such a program in the county in the spring of 2008. When Shawnie Carrier, former director of external affairs for the Chamber/EDC, left the organization in June 2008, the leadership task was given to Brian Thompson, the organization's new director of external affairs.

Working with the chamber's education and leadership committee, Thompson began working on the initial program on the day he started with the organization in June 2008.

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“Aaron told me that the leadership program would be my primary focus for the first several weeks of my employment,” said Thompson. “So we began planning how to put together an effective program that would educate local participants on how to become leaders, better leaders if they already serve in such roles and on what offerings Cross County has locally.”

While Thompson had never facilitated a leadership program, he had served as a participant in a similar class in Newport.

“Attending the New Vision Newport leadership program was one of the highlights of my professional career,” said Thompson. “I knew that we needed to develop something similar to that program to give our participants in Cross County a memorable experience.”

After several weeks of planning and discussion by Stewart, Thompson and the committee, they decided to contract with the University of Arkansas’ Cooperative Extension Service to develop a monthly leadership curriculum. The UACES handled that aspect of the program while Thompson worked with local and regional guest speakers to discuss area issues at the monthly meetings of the 9-month program.

“The Cooperative Extension Service offers fantastic instruction,” said Thompson. “Then, our local and regional speakers give the participants updates on important subjects such as health care, education, fire protection, etc. from throughout Cross County. It’s a great chance for those involved to learn more about their county as a whole. It’s not just Parkin or Cherry Valley or Wynne or Hickory Ridge. It is Cross County completely.”

Fourteen local residents participated in the first leadership program, which Stewart said was also made possible by the generosity of local businesses and organizations that provided sponsorships at various levels.

“Cross County really showed that they want to see future leaders developed,” said Stewart. “We can’t express our appreciation enough to those businesses and organizations that provided sponsorships for the first program.”

While many have touted the success of the first leadership program, Thompson added that the journey has only just begun. A second leadership class is being formed. It will meet for the first time on Friday, Sept. 25 at the East Arkansas Community College Adventure Training Center in Forrest City.

“We are now accepting applications for our second program,” said Thompson. “Also, we are looking for continuing and new sponsors. Letters have been sent to last year’s

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sponsors. We will also contact members of the Cross County Chamber to see if they would like to sponsor the program.”

For more information, and for a downloadable application, visit the chamber’s website at www.crosscountychamber.com.