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October 7, 2006

Event touts I-85 project

By Alvin Benn
Montgomery Advertiser

It might be years away, but construction of an Interstate 85 extension from Montgomery to the Mississippi state line will be a big boost for much of central Alabama and not just the Black Belt region.

Harold L. Boone Jr., director of Minority Business Development for the Montgomery Area Chamber of Commerce, predicted that industrial growth along the extension "is sure to benefit the entire area."

"We've got the new Hyundai plant here now, and the Kia plant is coming up in West Point, Ga., which will certainly help Macon County," said Boone, who participated in the 11th annual Booker T. Washington Economic Development Summit at Tuskegee University.

Minority business leaders from throughout the country took part in the event, which often focuses attention on the needs of rural Alabama.

Workshops at the conference ranged from procuring federal contracts to dealing with legal issues related to industrial development.

Boone called I-85 a "high-tech corridor" and said small counties such as Macon will benefit as well as Montgomery, which is the centerpiece of the five-county River Region.

Velma Blackwell, who helped organize the conference, said her school's well-known name should help Macon County as it seeks more industrial jobs.

"People who have not heard of some places in Montgomery know about Booker T. Washington and George Washington Carver," she said. "That's one reason we have this conference every year."

I-85 cuts through the middle of east central Alabama and ends in Montgomery. Studies are under way to decide what route to take to extend it to Mississippi.

U.S. Sen. Richard Shelby, R-Tuscaloosa, sponsored legislation to appropriate more than \$1 million to consider the feasibility of an extension and, if so, the route to take.

Two plans under consideration now would extend the interstate north or south of Selma, which is linked to U.S. 80.

Those familiar with interstate construction said growth will occur, especially at exits where retail establishments and industrial parks flourish.

Thomas Dortch Jr., one of the speakers at the conference, said small businesses often are left out of the mix when corporations reap the benefits of industrial development "and the money doesn't trickle down to the smaller businesses."

Dortch, whose Atlanta-based firm focuses on business development, added, "If rural areas of our country are going to grow, small businesses must grow and prosper with the big ones."

He said the Small Business Administration's definition of a small business is "any company with gross receipts of \$5 million or under annually."

"The reality of it is a large number of small businesses don't even have \$1 million in gross receipts a year," Dortch said, who added that the majority of business in America is done by small firms.

Others who took part in the conference included Barbara McKee of the U.S. Department of Energy, William Pickard of the Global Automobile Alliance of Detroit, Leona Barr-Davenport of the Atlanta Business League, Ronald Evans of the Housing Center Inc. of Washington and Edward Menifee, a business consultant from Atlanta.

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