

Rural Studies Institute to launch database on rural counties' greatest assets

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Georgia College's Rural Studies Institute (RSI) recently named Georgia Tech's Center for Sustainable Communities Research and Education (SCSRE) as a site for its Boldwin County's natural resources and parks.

The Rural Studies Institute was established in January 2001 to

study rural communities and identify opportunities that support their advancement. RSI influences both students and the general public on issues that impact the future of rural communities.

A central part of RSI's mission is to provide transformation learning experiences through short-term work opportunities and student

internships. These experiences allow students to apply their knowledge while contributing to community-based activities," said RSI Executive Director Dr. Vanessa Womack.

This year, student interns representing Georgia College & State University, the University of Georgia, and Georgia Tech spent the summer building a database for

RSI that focused on natural resources in Middle Georgia rural communities.

The database is a starting point for collecting and protecting the "unique" assets and topography to the local region. It will also highlight hunting and fishing opportunities to draw out local businesses, record public facilities and artistic programs and other features in rural communities throughout Georgia.

"We are aiming to use this database to assist regional planning and to facilitate community-based approaches, including the use regional strategies to bring people to these rural communities," Womack said.

The three student interns working on the database were present at the Boldwin County site visit and represented RSI and W&L. The RSI interns were sponsored by the Partnership for Innovation minors' internship program and another student for SCSRE was sponsored by the Mississippi Commission

On Rural Prosperity.

The initial site visit included Mayor Mickey Perkins-Caplan, Commissioner Emily Davis, and County Manager Carlos Urban. The students personally worked with Mr. Urban on the county forested report, so he and Commissioner Davis participated in the visit, along with the mayor," said Womack. "This visit was the first of many meetings to come and I look forward to having more discussions with both county and city officials and the general public."

The database used Boldwin County as the core of several rural counties — including Hancock, Wilkes, Washington, Jones, and Putnam — and identified the natural assets available in these rural Middle Georgia counties. Georgia has two distinct rural county regions within the state, including the Appalachian counties and the Black Belt region. The Appalachian counties are located in North Georgia and the Black Belt

counties are in Middle and South Georgia.

"These three interns participated in this high impact learning experience to build a database that will highlight the treasures of the Black Belt region. We wanted to highlight natural resources," said Womack. "We have been immensely blessed with our natural resources. We have lakes, rivers, farms, wetlands, and a community built on a phenomenal resilience and heart."

The database will be an ongoing project, having interns throughout the year. Womack hopes to launch the database for public viewing by the end of September on the Rural Studies Institute website. Womack says future plans to have site visits to other counties are in the works and a more formal site visit will also be planned for Boldwin County in the future.

"Counties have challenges but also have numerous opportunities and assets," said Womack. "We are trying to build this Century rural communities that are sustainable."