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Senator Billy Beasley
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Black Belt Commission

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ALABAMA RURAL DEVELOPMENT OFFICE'S BLACK BELT COMMISSION OFF TO A STRONG START

On February 23, 2011, the Black Belt Commission met at Wallace State Community College in Selma to kick start its work for 2011. Attending the meeting was Ron Sparks, Director of the Alabama Rural Development Office, which was created by the Governor's Executive Order Number 5, on January 26, 2011. Sparks stated that Governor Bentley is committed to focusing on improving conditions in our state's most economically challenged counties and to the betterment of the quality of life of the citizens of



Emily Law, Congresswoman Terri Sewell and Ron Sparks pause for a picture.

those areas. Emily Law serves as Executive Director of the BBC and Commission Co-chairs are Senator Hank Sanders, Margaret Bentley, Mayor Sheldon Day, and Senator Billy Beasley.

First on the agenda was an assurance from Mr. Sparks that the work in the Black Belt is a priority of Governor Bentley and that it will not only continue, but expand. One of the major focuses of the Black Belt Commission will be healthcare. Congresswoman Terri Sewell, who attended the February meeting, officially accepted the responsibility of chairing the BBC Health Committee. Chad Nichols, of Sight Savers America, will serve as her Co-Chair. The entire Commission consists of people dedicated to improving the region.

Many projects are underway for the Black Belt. A fruit and vegetable market and innovation center will be constructed in Selma as a key project of the Agriculture Committee. The Communications Committee's project of training displaced workers is ongoing. Dropout prevention is a key focus of the Education Committee. Other committee projects include assisting Black Belt high school students in obtaining summer employment, educating rural entrepreneurs, building new and improving existing infrastructures, and locating new business opportunities for Black Belt farmers.



"We are excited about the possibilities for the Black Belt under Governor Bentley's administration," Law stated. "We have a group of people who are dedicated to improving this region and working together, we believe there's nothing we can't accomplish." There was a renewed excitement in the meeting from all the Co-Chairs, Committee Chairs, and Project Managers.

Congresswoman Terri Sewell, Co-Chairs Margaret Bentley, Sheldon Day, Senator Billy Beasley and Senator Hank Sanders share podium with Ron Sparks, Director Alabama Rural Development Office.



**Senator
Hank Sanders**



Margaret Bentley



**Mayor
Sheldon Day**



**Senator
Billy Beasley**

THE BLACK BELT COMMISSION IS “MOVING”

By the Black Belt Commission Co-Chairs

Senator Hank Sanders, Senator Billy Beasley, Margaret Bentley, Mayor Sheldon Day

As co-chairs of the Black Belt Commission, we want you to know that the Commission is moving with even more strength and determination than ever before. All thirteen committees and their projects are moving. We are all moving to implement the powerful vision of a transformed Alabama Black Belt.

The people of the Black Belt are moving. They want to see a better Black Belt. We realize that the Black Belt can only be truly transformed with the people in the Black Belt. Others can and are helping, but the ultimate transformation springs from the people. That’s why it’s so important that the people of the Black Belt are moving.

Alabama Governor Robert Bentley is moving. Ron Sparks, Director of the Rural Development Office, is moving. They both hit the ground moving. We are thankful for their vision, their commitment and their leadership. We felt their movement in our last meeting. Ron Sparks personally participated in the meeting and we could feel the energy he brought on behalf of Governor Bentley and himself. It fused with the energy of committee chairs and other key leaders, causing all to move even more powerfully. Yes, we are moving.

The Committee Chairs are moving. In fact, they never stopped moving. They are the heart beat of this transformational effort, and they are now moving with even more focus and effectiveness. Yes, we are moving.

We welcome Senator Billy Beasley as the fourth co-chair. He joins Margaret Bentley, Sheldon Day and Hank Sanders who have been serving for years. As State Senator, Senator Beasley represents two (Macon and Bullock) of the 12 counties in the Alabama Black Belt. Now as co-chair of the Black Belt Commission, he is working for the entire Black Belt region. We could feel his commitment, his energy and his caring at the meeting in February. He is now moving with us – Governor Bentley, Ron Sparks, the original co-chairs, the committee chairs, leaders of the regional planning commissions and the people of the Black Belt. He is moving.

We understand that to make a transforming difference, we must not only move, but move together. We are all moving in that understanding and that spirit. We are moving.

TERRI A. SEWELL
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Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515-0107

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GENERAL FARM COMMODITIES AND RISK MANAGEMENT

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SCIENCE, SPACE, AND TECHNOLOGY

SUBCOMMITTEE ON
SPACE AND AERONAUTICS

April 6, 2011

SUBCOMMITTEE ON
RESEARCH AND SCIENCE EDUCATION

SENIOR WHIP



Black Belt Commission:

Nearly three months ago, I was honored to be sworn in as the representative of the 7th Congressional District of Alabama. On day one, I received numerous calls from my constituents about the health care bill, and how it has begun to help them. In January, I made my very first floor speech against repealing the Affordable Care Act on the floor of the House of Representatives. While it is not a perfect bill, the Affordable Care Act is the first of many steps toward strengthening our health care system and is already helping to improve the lives of constituents in the 7th Congressional District and people all across the country. This law puts Americans back in charge of their own health care, and reduces our deficit.

Every person in Alabama and America should have access to affordable, quality health care, whether they live in a city or a small town. Ensuring that people in the Black Belt and the 7th District have the health care resources they need will require commitment and collaboration between government, businesses, organizations and the public. I am excited and honored to have the opportunity to serve as the co-chair of the Black Belt Commission's Health Committee, and look forward to working with my co-chair, Chad Nichols and the other members of the committee to work towards safeguarding the well-being of our seniors, children and families.

Sincerely,

TERRI A. SEWELL
Member of Congress

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SENATOR BILLY BEASLEY BECOMES 4TH BLACK BELT COMMISSION CO-CHAIR

Senator Billy Beasley has accepted the invitation issued by the Black Belt Commission to become the Commission's fourth Co-Chair. He represents two counties in the Black Belt, Macon and Bullock and has a passion for joining forces with Senator Hank Sanders, Margaret Bentley and Mayor Sheldon Day who have served as Co-Chairs for the past five years.



Senator Beasley was elected in the November 2nd general election after serving three terms in the Alabama House of Representatives. He serves on the following Committees in the Senate: Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry; Constitution, Campaign Finance, Ethics and Elections; Finance and Taxation General Fund; and the Health Committee.

He was born March 19, 1940 and received his B.S. Degree in Pharmacy from Auburn University in 1962. He and his wife, Rebecca, have five children.

Senator Beasley is President of Pratts Station, LLC, and operates the Clayton Drug Company, Clio Drug Company, and Louisville Drug Store. He's a member of the Clayton United Methodist Church and serves on the Board of Directors for the Eufaula/Barbour County Chamber of Commerce. Senator Beasley is a member of the Barbour County Hospital Board and the Auburn Alumni Association. He is a past President of both the Alabama Pharmaceutical Association and Clayton Rotary Club.

The Black Belt Commission welcomes Senator Billy Beasley.

New Chair of Marketing and Tourism Committee Possesses Vast Knowledge and Experience

Pamela J. Swanner has been tapped to serve as Chair of the Black Belt Commission Marketing and



Tourism Committee. Pam currently serves as the Director of Alabama Black Belt Adventures, a public/private non-profit organization dedicated to fostering economic development in a 23-county region of the State of Alabama that includes the 12-county region of the Black Belt Commission. Pam markets and promotes outdoor recreational opportunities such as hunting, fishing, canoeing, hiking, birdwatching, as well as cultural and heritage amenities.

Pam comes to the commission with twenty-five years of leadership experience in the tourism industry and years of professional service in both the public and private sector that includes the Alabama Tourism Partnership, the Alabama Travel Council, the Alabama Hospitality Association and the Alabama Bureau of Travel and Tourism. She is a past project manager for the Alabama Birding Trails development commissioned by the Alabama Tourism Department.

Black Belt Commission's Education Committee Holds Dropout Prevention Summit

On February 18, 2011, educators from across the state gathered to learn strategies for keeping Alabama students in school until they earn a diploma. The conference was held at the Renaissance Montgomery Hotel from 8:00 a.m. until 4:00 p.m.

"Since its inception, dropout prevention has been high on the list of goals established by the Education Committee," said committee chairman Dr. Daniel Boyd, Superintendent of Lowndes County Schools. "Our hope was that this summit would serve as a forum for the exchange of sound educational ideas



Dr. Daniel Boyd, Black Belt Commission Education Chair and Dr. Charles Nash, Education Committee member.

related to dropout prevention." The conference featured a range of skilled presenters whose proven programs and research-based strategies are designed to enhance student performance and improve student outcome in dropout prevention. Speakers included Mrs. Ella Bell, State Board Member, District V; Dr. Tommie Bice, Alabama State Department of Education; Mr. Ron Sparks, Director of the Alabama Rural Development Office; Senator Hank Sanders; and Dr. Gene Bottoms of the Southern Regional Education Board, among others.

Dr. Zanetta Simmons-Ervin, Federal Programs Coordinator for Selma City Schools, attended the conference and said it was an excellent experience. "It was very personal," she said. Even though approximately 250 people attended, Simmons-Ervin said, "It was not so large that you felt lost in the crowd. The breakout sessions allowed you to ask questions."

Another participant, Darryl Arms, Principal of Fort Deposit Elementary, said the best part of the conference for him was learning about the early warning signals of dropouts. "Since I'm in early elementary education, that was very beneficial for me. We

need to know what each particular student's barriers to graduation are, and we must continue to work with those students individually and with their homes. The home/school connection is where it all begins."

Dr. Charles Nash, Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs for the University of Alabama System and a member of the Black Belt Commission's Education Committee, agreed that dropout prevention is not simply a high school issue. "My focus is not just K12, but how students then move into jobs or postsecondary education effectively," Nash said. "Dropout problems from K12 should also be a concern and responsibility for colleges and universities, so that students are able to graduate and seek employment successfully and are able to go on to colleges and universities in Alabama. We need to have a 'PK to PhD' perspective. We are all in this together at every level to ensure successful linkages and progression from elementary to middle school to high school to college or university."



Dr. Gene Bottoms, Southern Regional Education Board, gives closing remarks.

BROADBAND UPDATE

BROADBAND PROJECT TO HELP CREATE JOBS

By Markeshia Ricks, Montgomery, Advertiser

A new broadband project is expected to bring not only high-speed internet access to Alabama's Black Belt region, but also more than 1,200 jobs.

The more than 100 Alabama contractors who met at Alabama State University on Wednesday March 16 to find out how to become part of that project learned they might not get rich doing it, but they could enrich one of the state's most economically distressed areas and change the lives of those who live in it. Alabama contractors with experience building communications infrastructure would accomplish this by putting broadband access in reach of thousands of homes and businesses in that region by 2013.

Thanks to millions in federal grant money, the first phase of a project that would install more than 2,200 miles of fiber-optic lines to provide broadband access in Butler, Crenshaw, Conecuh, Dallas, Escambia, Lowndes, Macon and Wilcox counties is set to begin in April. The South Central Alabama Broadband Commission, a consortium of government and nonprofit organizations, with the help of the Bessemer-based Trillion Communications Corp. secured the money to build out a network that would provide community-funded Internet services. The project also will build out wireless capabilities to support access for public safety and government agencies.

The first phase of the project will extend from Montgomery to Selma, along U.S. 80. Ultimately, the network would extend to Escambia County. But Antwon Alsobrook, president and CEO of Atlanta-based A2D Inc., said the network could expand west to Mississippi and east to Georgia. A2D Inc. is a network systems integration firm that specializes in broadband-based infrastructure development. The company is facilitating the rollout of the project. Alsobrook said while there is plenty of labor intensive work for contractors to do in getting the network up and running, there is still plenty of work for advocates of broadband to do in their communities. He said community partners would be needed to help those who don't know how to use a computer, don't own a computer or don't see the need for a computer to overcome those barriers.

And that's where the state's broadband initiative will come in, Connecting Alabama Executive Director Jessica Dent said.

Southwest Alabama



P R O C U R E M E N T C O N F E R E N C E

Sponsored By:

**The Small Business Development Center
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Ron Sparks, Guest Speaker

Director of the Alabama Rural Development Office

April 14, 2011

8:30 A.M. - 4:00 P.M.

Thomasville Civic Center
559 West Front Street, North
Thomasville, Alabama 36784

\$ 0 Cost

This event is free and open to the public. Seating is limited so get your registration in early!



7th Annual

Free Eye Clinic for Perry County Children

*Sight Savers America and Doctors from UAB Ophthalmology
Serve Children at the One-Day Clinic*

On April 12th, Sight Savers America and eye care professionals from The UAB Department of Ophthalmology will travel to the Perry County Health Department to provide comprehensive eye care to pre-screened children in the Alabama Black Belt. The clinic marks a six-year milestone in delivering free eye care to underserved children in Perry County. Sight Savers has scheduled appointments for 100 underserved children, who previously failed vision screenings in their schools and day care centers, to receive comprehensive eye exams, eyeglasses and other treatments. Diagnosis and treatment can range from free eyeglasses, delivered on-site by LensCrafters, to sight saving surgery. Sight Savers staff coordinates this event for children who failed vision-screenings by the following Black Belt Eye Care Consortium partnering organizations; Focus First, KidCheck, Alabama Lions Sight Conservation Association and Vision Research Corporation.

Three ophthalmologists, including Dr. Martin Cogen (Pediatric Ophthalmologist, Dept. Ophthalmology UAB Medical School) will be in attendance to provide eye care. These eye doctors have graciously volunteered their time and services. Approximately eleven Sight Savers staff members and volunteers will also be in attendance.

The clinic is available through the Black Belt Eye Care Consortium (BBECC), an eight member alliance led by Sight Savers America that has provided thousands of free eye glasses and hundreds of free sight saving treatments to underserved children and adults in the Black Belt. The BBECC was created in 2004 as an outreach of the Black Belt Action Commission's Health Committee.

BBC Executive Committees

Agriculture Committee

John Zippert, Chair

Communications Committee

Dr. David Hale, Chair

Community Development Committee

Felecia Jones, Chair

Cultural and Youth Committee

Dr. Carol Zippert, Chair

Education Committee

Dr. Daniel Boyd, Chair

Skills Training

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Families Committee

Dr. Lynn Boyd, Chair

Health Committee

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Chad Nichols, Co-Chair

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Pam Swanner, Chair

Small Business

Donald Mills, Chair

Transportation

Shirley Worthington, Chair

BBC

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