

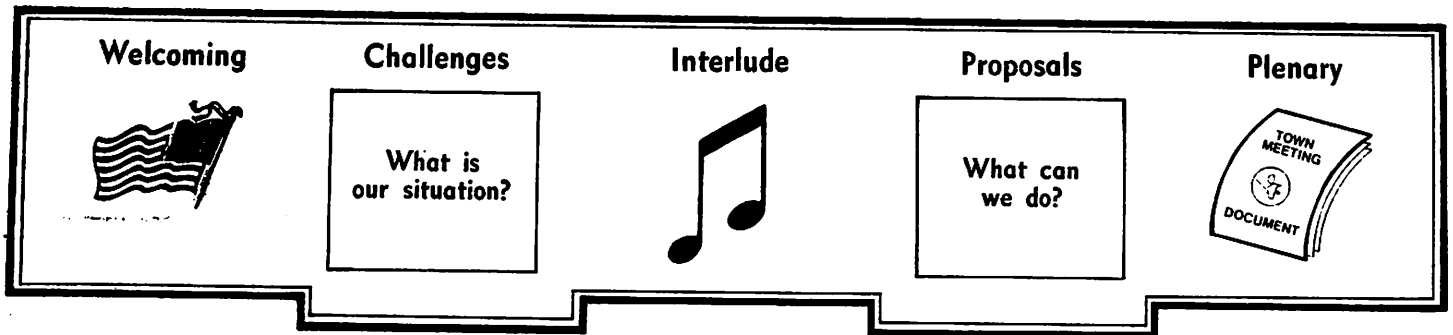


**A Report
on the
TOWN MEETING:
Mississippi 200
Program**

Nov. 1978 – June 1979

**Toward a national demonstration
of effective citizen participation**

The Town Meeting Event

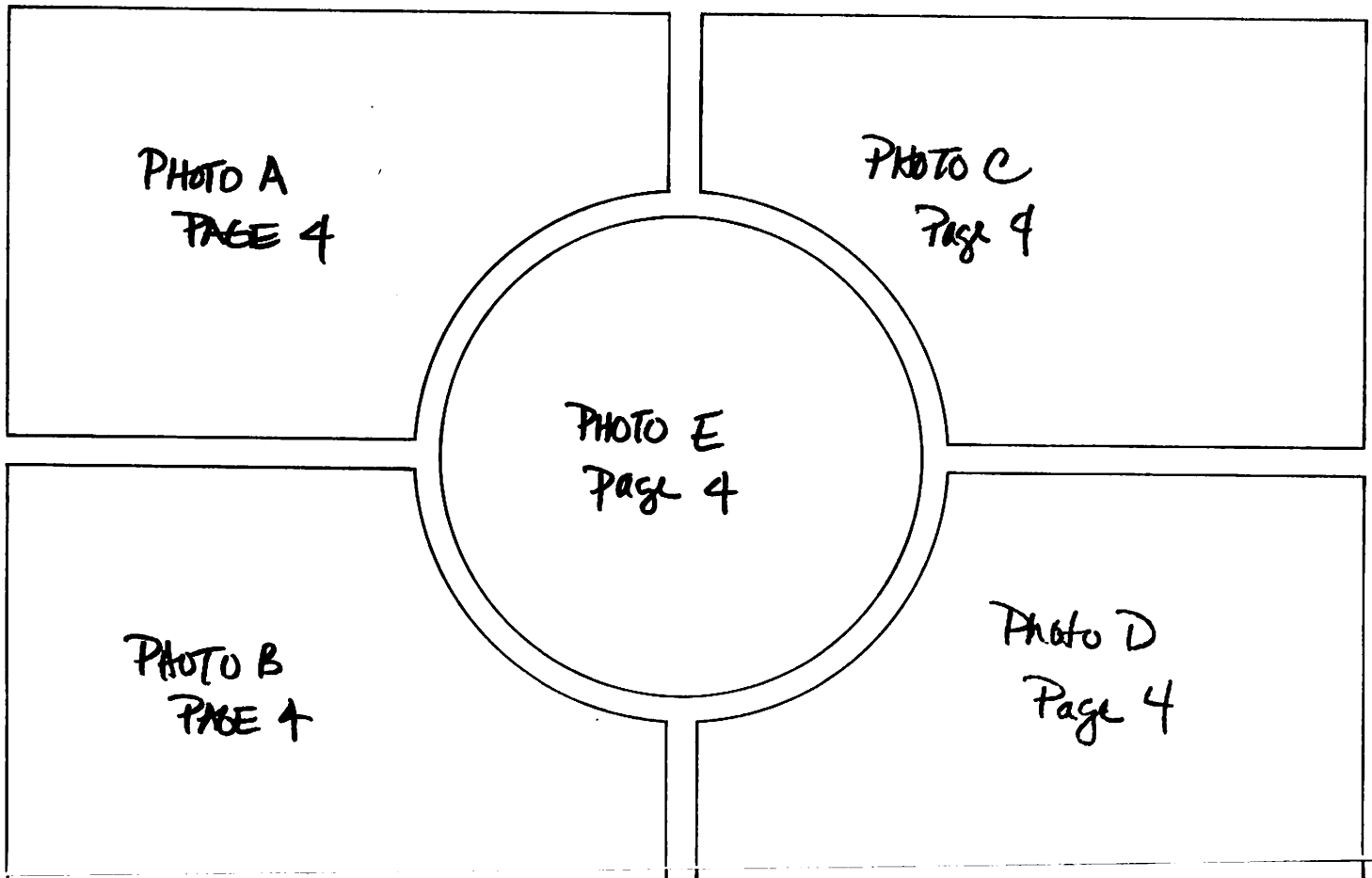


The Town Meeting is a community event designed to release citizen participation. It promotes a "we can" attitude by enabling a community's residents to plan realizable goals and visible activities they can do in their own town. The meetings provide an opportunity for communication between local citizens and their elected officials.

Each Town Meeting begins with a welcome by a community leader, singing and introduction of guests. A Town Meeting staff member presents an overview of the meeting. During the first workshop, the group discusses the community's actual situation and states

the challenges facing the town. During the interlude, refreshments are served and a small group presents their new song, story and symbol representing the history and future of the community. In the second workshop, the group lists suggestions of activities and then writes proposals of action they can do.

In the festive closing session, the proposals are reported, discussed and first implementing steps are planned. Documents containing the meeting's work are distributed. The citizens close the meeting by singing their new song, and leave with a new resolve to deal responsibly with their community.



A Statewide Program



District by District, 8526 Mississippians Participated

Town Meeting: Mississippi 200 was a program designed to encourage citizen participation by conducting Town Meetings and Forums in towns and cities across the state. To assure maximum statewide participation, at least 20 meetings were held in each of the Planning and Development Districts from October 1978 to June 1979. The program offered three events to each community: Town Meeting, Global Women's Forum and Community Youth Forum.

The program had staff working in each district for approximately one month to set up and lead the meetings and forums. The first step in setting up the event was to contact the mayor and civic leaders. They invited a cross section of residents to a planning meeting to organize the Town Meeting for their community. Radio, newspapers, flyers and "word of mouth" announced the meeting. Civic organizations, churches, youth groups and schools became involved. Local officials, agency representatives and legislators were invited. Familiar places took on a new look as churches, firehalls, schools, courthouses, lodges and even an open pavilion became meeting places. And people came!

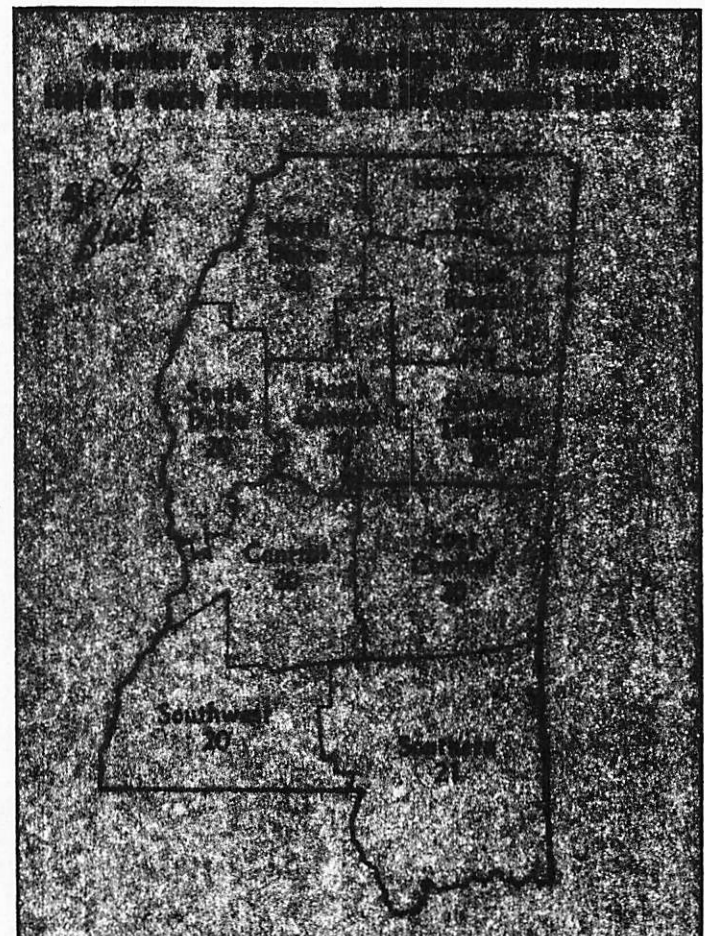
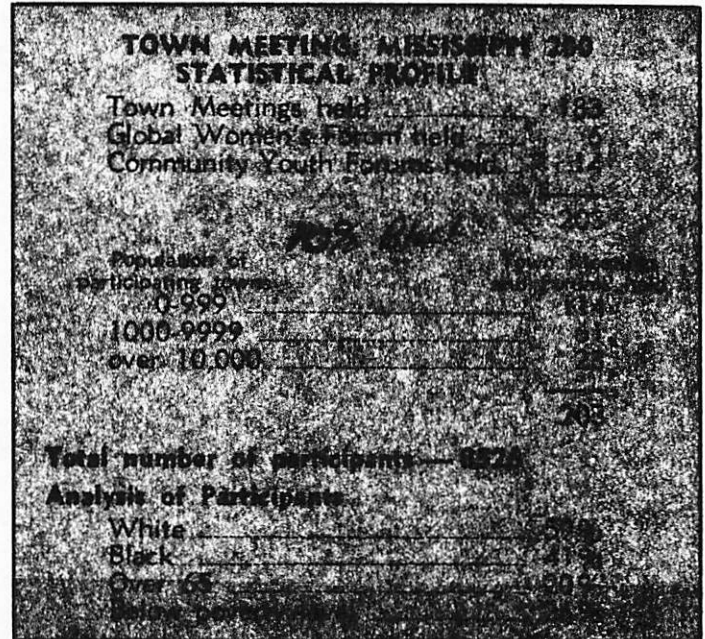
Town Meetings were held successfully in all types of communities. Men and women, youth and elders, residents of all ages and from every walk of life worked together, often for the first time.

Special meetings were held which focused on the particular concerns of women. Global Women's Forum was first held in the Governor's Mansion for 127 women from across the state. Women of varied backgrounds discerned major issues of our society, addressed the challenges revealed and focused personal priorities for responding in their communities. They decided to re-invest their experience by encouraging similar programs. Five more forums brought the number of women involved to 319.

Fourteen Community Youth Forums involved 764 young people in the task of looking at the question of their meaningful participation in the society. They articulated their dreams for the future and created practical actions for responding to community needs.

Since the first meeting, held on April 10, 1976, in Jackson, 13,136 Mississippians have participated in 299 Town Meetings and Forums. Over half of the incorporated towns (167 of 288) and 69 unincorporated communities held at least one event.

On June 23, 1979, the TOWN MEETING: MISSISSIPPI 200 Program will officially end with the State Assembly held in Jackson. Citizens will report on what has happened since their Town Meeting, look forward to the coming year and celebrate the greatest resource Mississippi has — the creativity of the people.



Challenges and Proposals

849 local statements bring focus to the major challenges facing Mississippi communities

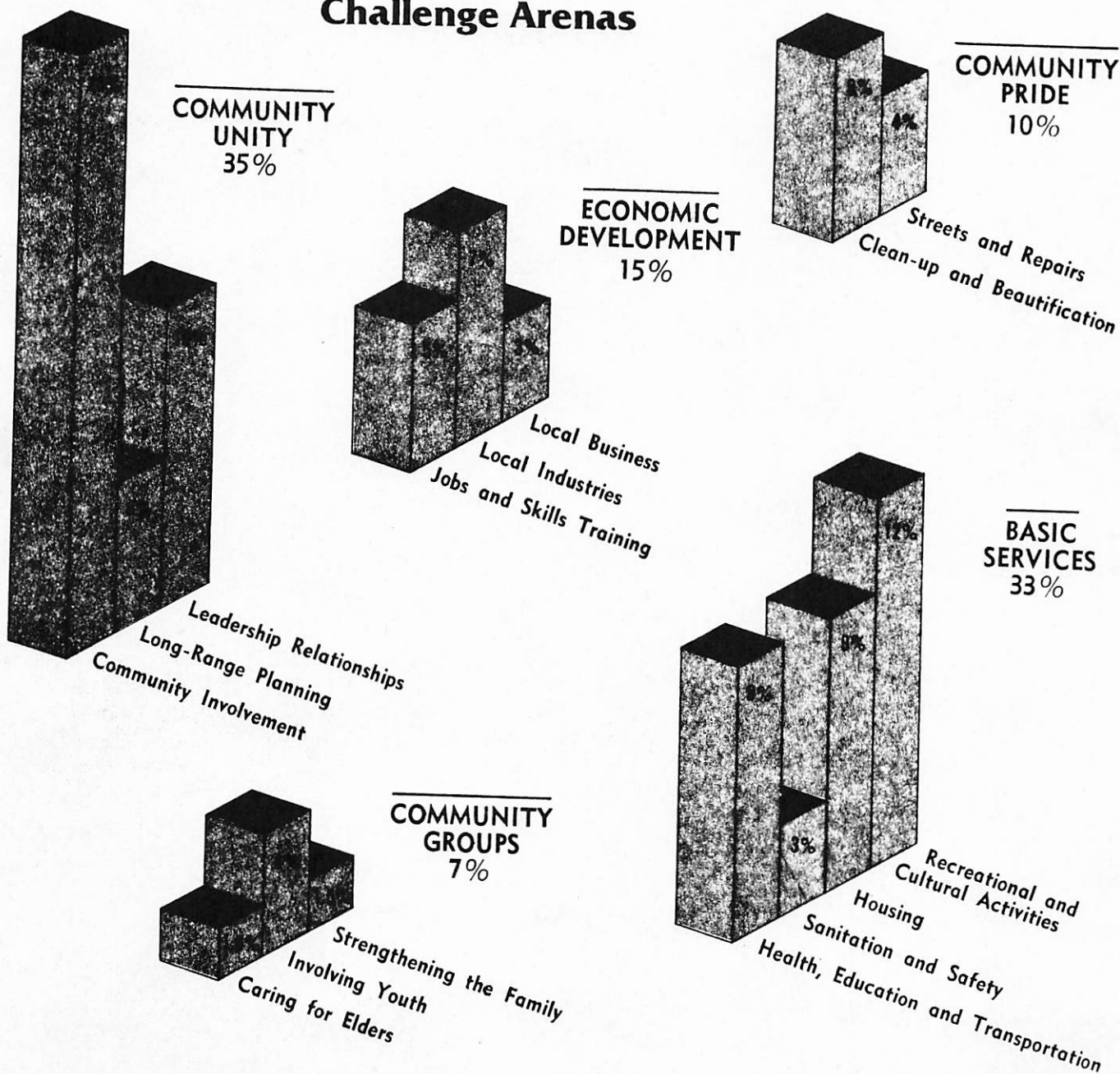
Local residents in the 203 Town Meetings and Forums in Mississippi wrote 894 challenge statements. These statements are descriptions of the areas of concern to which the people must respond in order to deal effectively with their community problems.

The graphs below represent a compiling of related challenges into major arenas. For example, the arena **Community Involvement** includes such challenges as

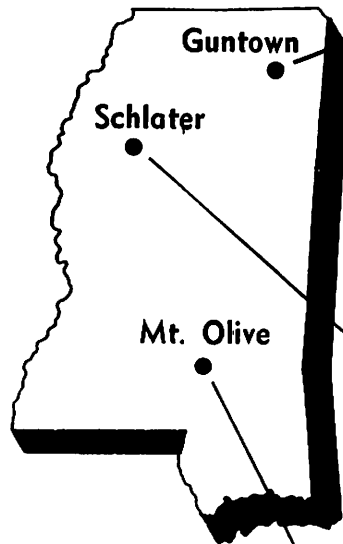
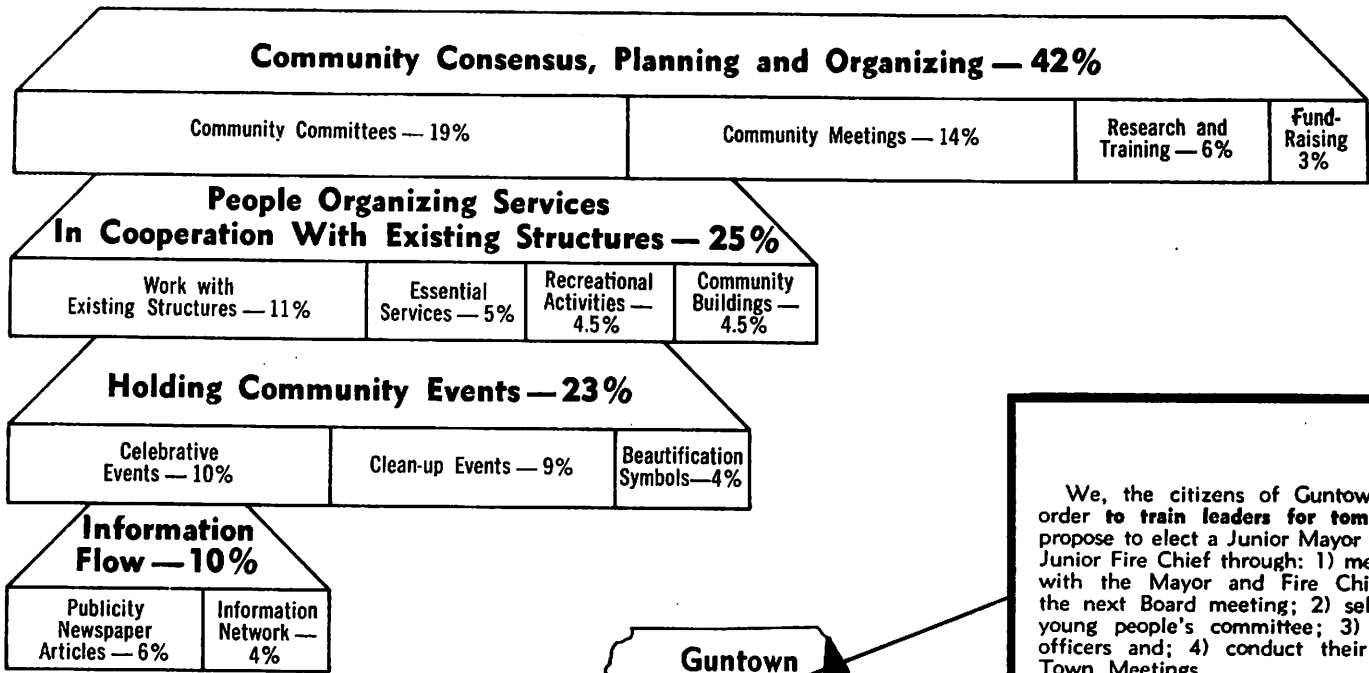
low voter turnouts, the "let George do it" attitude, and getting "everyone pulling together." Creating opportunities for more local volunteers and awakening residents to community needs are also included.

In the challenge workshops, the citizens became excited to see that they could create solutions to community problems.

Challenge Arenas



Proposal Arenas



We, the citizens of Guntown, in order to **train leaders for tomorrow** propose to elect a Junior Mayor and a Junior Fire Chief through: 1) meeting with the Mayor and Fire Chief at the next Board meeting; 2) select a young people's committee; 3) elect officers and; 4) conduct their own Town Meetings

Guntown Town Meeting

We the citizens of Schlater in order to **improve community participation and interest** propose continued town meetings to promote fellowship and organization. At the next town meeting each person from the first meeting is responsible for bringing another person. A flyer will be distributed to publicize the meeting. At that meeting reports from this first meeting will be given, and ideas for community projects will be presented. A committee will be appointed to set up the guidelines for the clean-up contest.

Schlater Town Meeting

We the citizens of Mt. Olive, in order to **get people involved in cleaning up the town**, propose to have a clean-up day through: 1) hold in April on a Saturday; 2) contest on who picks up the most garbage; 3) close off Main Street for a fish fry and dance; 4) morning pickup and afternoon celebration; 5) proceeds go to the recreation fund.

Mt. Olive Town Meeting

Local citizens formulate 701 practical proposals in response to challenges

In the second workshop, participants wrote practical proposals in response to the challenges facing that community. There were 701 proposal statements written during the 203 Town Meetings across Mississippi. In these, Mississippians declared what they, as citizens, will be doing during the next year.

Participants looked at their community's situation and listed possible activities. From this list they decided on particular actions which would simultaneously relate to several challenges. For example, a community clean-up day and celebration deals with community involvement, beautifying the environment, engaging the youth and raising funds for other projects.

Across the state, Mississippi citizens became excited about creating practical plans for local action and demonstrated their decision to work together to build the future in their local communities.

A question often asked about Town Meeting is, "What happens afterwards?" There is no single answer — each town is unique, therefore its response to the Town Meeting is not predictable. In some communities the meeting sparks new ideas about dealing with old problems. In others, new energy is injected into existing programs. Many towns discover a new awareness of their communities' situation. In practically every case, the proposals and the action taken to carry them out have aided and strengthened the structures which already existed.

Perhaps the best way to answer the question would be to allow the towns to speak for themselves. The accounts which follow give a brief picture of some of the towns in which Town Meetings were held. The stories feature towns of various sizes, towns from every portion of the state and towns of varied social and economic composition. Some of the towns started working on their proposals several months ago. Others have only worked a few weeks.

Among the variety of events which have happened in the towns, there is a common picture; citizens are actively engaged in developing their communities.

NORTH BAY AREA Harrison County



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A proposal to create a citizen association has resulted in the St. Martin-D'Iberville Civic Improvement Society, Inc., which has been given the mandate of creating a plan for the development of the area, ensuring a feasibility study on development, planning for incorporation and coordinating all the plans with the county and state authorities. Progress has been rapid in all these areas. The Gulf Regional Planning and Development District is creating the feasibility study for the North Bay Area, and the community plans to begin raising its share of the funds through holding an "old-fashioned rally" in early July.

Incorporation plans are moving through the planning process. The name "North Bay" has been selected for the town, along with the Mayor-Alderman form of government.

With all the activity and community cooperation visible these days, North Bay citizens are fulfilling the claim Governor Finch made when he attended their Town Meeting, "People caring about their community is the best thing going!"

During the last decade, the sprawling suburban area of North Bay, north of Biloxi, has experienced rapid economic and population growth. Residents are now facing the challenge of providing adequate public services and effective long-range planning. Responding to these needs, Vernon Simmons, Chamber of Commerce president, gathered citizens for a Town Meeting planning session. Citizens responded enthusiastically, and on Sunday, January 28, 100 attended the Town Meeting. "People were working and having a good time. I've never seen so many people so enthusiastic," Mr. Simmons commented. The Town Meeting brought citizen's concerns into common focus. One area of concern was the inadequate fire protection, which was underscored by the presence at the meeting of 30 firemen in full uniform.

Soon after the Town Meeting, the proposal to upgrade the firefighting equipment was carried out. Mr. Ernest Melvin, president of the Harrison County Board of Supervisors, arranged for the purchase of a new pumper truck for the Volunteer Fire Department. The firemen began raising the necessary funds to modernize their present equipment.

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CROSSROADS Hinds County

"Let us become responsible for all the mournful cries, we hear them from the aged, the youth, the children . . ."—Crossroad Town Meeting song

Crossroads, comprised of six small rural settlements in Hinds County, shares a common identity and considers itself to be one community. Over 130 people of all ages crowded into the Crossroads old school house building for their Saturday Town Meeting. Families came — bringing the oldest and youngest members. Chairs had to be brought in from Jackson in order to seat the crowd. The day was highlighted by entertainment consisting of choirs, poetry readings, family singers, musicians and story tellers. A potluck dinner was provided as each participant brought their "family specialty."

The Crossroads community is characterized by a large population of elders. One challenge was the lack of services available for the aged, particularly transportation to medical facilities. The participants left the Town Meeting having decided to care for all the people of Crossroads in as many ways as possible.

STONEWALL Clarke County

The old school auditorium filled with laughter, loud voices and greetings as 139 citizens joined in Stonewall's February Town Meeting. Everyone expressed delight and surprise at the large attendance, an obvious demonstration of enthusiasm for Stonewall.

The participants wrote six challenges focused on the need for strong leadership, community involvement and youth activities. The town song written at the meeting declares, "The only way we can move is . . . Stonewall straight ahead."

After the Town Meeting, the Mayor and Board of Aldermen appointed a volunteer parks and recreation committee. The committee's job is to coordinate the city's recreational programs with those of the Jaycees and other groups.

Their first project is the establishment of a park. Organizations are being contacted for donations of equipment, and bids for land are being made. The park is seen as a crucial step in meeting the growing needs of Stonewall's youth. A clean-up campaign was organized and carried out by one neighborhood as a sign of community pride for all of Stonewall.

Things have happened since the Crossroads Town Meeting, such as the focusing on elder care. On May 12, Mr. Norman Harris, Director of the Mississippi Council on Aging, spoke to a large gathering of elders at a community luncheon. The Community is securing pledges to buy a bus to transport elders to medical facilities. The elders now know that Vista Volunteers are available to assist them. The community is closer because the elders are being cared for.

Another key event since the Town Meeting was a clean-up day. Thirty men, women and children organized from the six neighborhood committees spruced up front yards, highway and the church yard. A July 4th Community celebration is planned, a youth counselor is being selected and a dietician for those on fixed incomes will soon be available for the community. Crossroads is becoming responsible for all its residents. Recently, Ludia Ervin, a Vista Volunteer, stated: "The community has been aroused out of a state of apathy. People have become aware of caring."

NATCHEZ Adams County



"You think about your concerns and think, maybe, someday years from now, people will look at an accomplishment and wonder how this project got started. It can start here."

Natchez Democrat

Momentum for the Town Meeting began in January, when the Chamber of Commerce gathered a group of 45 civic leaders including the Mayor. They had the cooperation of radio and newspapers, but they recognized that the best publicity would be the "talking it up" approach. Their united efforts paid off. Two hundred citizens gathered for the Town Meeting, making it one of the largest of all the Mississippi 200 meetings. A cross section of the city was represented, including young and old, rich and poor, local officials and industrial workers. Mayor Tony Byrne said, "Not only was it well attended, but those in attendance also participated." Tom Carter, Chamber of Commerce Director, reflected that the Town Meeting "brought people together who usually don't get their input into projects."

One concern which appeared in the challenges involved the planning for the proposed bridge across the Mississippi River. Because of various problems, this multi-million dollar project had become stalled. The Town Meeting gave the citizens the opportunity to restate their concern about the completion of this project and communicate this concern to the planning authorities. This expression of concern helped assure that this vital project will be completed in the near future.

Another proposal named in the Town Meeting suggested a clean-up campaign. Soon after the meeting, the Beautification Committee was reactivated and with the cooperation of the Garden Clubs and other civic groups, a campaign was scheduled for early March. On Saturday, March 3rd, people of all ages were seen cleaning the streets and carrying away bags of trash and litter. The campaign was the city's "spring cleaning" and prepared it for the annual historical pilgrimage. The enthusiasm and involvement of the citizens marks Natchez as a city on the move.

TCHULA Holmes County



Tchula, a town of 2,500, is typical of Delta towns. The community has a large population of elders and with a meager tax base, the town has found it difficult to provide basic services, such as street cleaning and up-keep. Forty citizens met for the Town Meeting and expressed concerns about law and order, low voter registration and community appearance.

Tchula residents got started working right away. They organized block clubs to patrol the streets, registered voters, cleaned ditches and public property. Prizes were given to the clubs doing the best job. Painting family homes was proposed to improve the community's appearance. Volunteers would do the painting for those unable to do it themselves.

Tchula is meeting the challenge stated in their Town Meeting song, "We'll do our best to make progress, Let's get started right away."

Mississippi is Leading the Way

