

At the outskirts of town stands a sign: *Welcome to Liberty, ringing the bell of progress.* In this rural, bedroom community nestled among the rolling hills of Southern Kentucky almost everyone has chimed in, and Mayor Steve Sweeney may very well be the chief bell ringer.

It all began in September 1996 when community leaders asked The Center for Rural Development to conduct strategic planning sessions. "The Center helped to energize and unify Liberty," says Sweeney. "Staff members from several Center offices, including the Planning and Policy Department, came to talk about the issues that were vital to us."

Through the strategizing, the county began to develop a plan. They formed committees to address manufacturing and industrial recruitment, education, agriculture, arts and culture, history and tradition, and families and children.

A group was formed to address strategies to boost tourism in the county. Just four short years later, property has been purchased for industrial development, a city/county cooperative has applied for a PRIDE grant to facilitate a recycling center, and the focal point of communal unity, the new Casey County Community and Youth Center, just opened last summer.

From professional development meetings, to bridal showers, to activities for young people, the Community Center is already in use five out of seven days every week and is open every day. "The building of this facility has been a real community effort," says Sweeney. "It started with fundraising; county-wide yard sales, bake sales, road blocks. Everything small towns do for fundraising, we did it. There was even a little lady who said she didn't have any money, but did have aluminum cans she had collected. So

she gave us her recycled cans to help with construction."

Sweeney says that eighty to eighty-five percent of the work was done by volunteers, making it "truly the community's center."

Looking back on the planning sessions where it all began and the help from The Center for Rural Development, Sweeney says, "Those sessions inspired people in this county to work dynamically and collaboratively on economic and environmental issues. Our citizens began to think about the future rather than the here-and-now."

As his eyes move around the large open room of Casey County's community center, Sweeney declares, "The Center for Rural Development is a powerful tool in the forty counties it serves, and the communities of those forty counties need to take advantage of that tool."

# LIBERTY bell

strategic planning provided by THE CENTER created a catalyst for mayor steve sweeney and many other casey county residents to begin implementing projects that create positive community growth