

# St. Louis Post Dispatch

## **Metro East seeks a new “brand”**

**Reports show conditions are favorable for economic growth in the region.**

By Terry Hillig

EDWARDSVILLE - Metro East business leaders and public officials appear ready to launch an economic development initiative that will include creation and promotion of a new "brand" for the Illinois counties across the Mississippi River from St. Louis.

In business terms, "branding" typically means establishing a strong identity for a product, service or place.

Area leaders gathered at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville Tuesday to hear results of Vision 2020, a 15-month effort to assess strengths and weaknesses of the local economy and identify opportunities for growth. Vision 2020 was coordinated by Leadership Council Southwestern Illinois, a regional economic development organization.

T.R. Carr, professor and chairman of SIUE's Department of Public Administration and Policy Analysis, said that, despite a sagging national economy and current local levee problems, the Metro East area has key resources that could foster strong economic growth. Among them, he said, are major energy-production assets, great access to transportation, the continued presence of heavy industry, an educated and experienced workforce, quality schools, a strong health care system and an excellent location in the middle of the country.

Carr and a colleague, Professor John Navin, conducted numerous interviews and collected data across Bond, Clinton, Madison, Monroe, Randolph, St. Clair and Washington counties. They used that information to compare the region with similar ones around the Midwest.

Carr said the region has a history of working well together to face common challenges and said that kind of cooperation will be needed to take full advantage of new opportunities and better compete in a changing world.

Patrick McKeehan, executive director of the Leadership Council, said the Metro East needed to stake out its own course for growth, while remaining a good partner with the Missouri portion of the St. Louis region.

"We have to become more global," he said. "We must establish a regional brand, nationally and globally."

McKeehan said the next steps will include establishment of a framework for promoting growth strategies. He said more specifics on that and creating a "brand" for the area would be announced in coming weeks.

For more information on Vision 2020, see <http://www.siu.edu/vision2020/>.