

Rice grant to fund 50-year study

Special to the News

The Charles and Catherine B. Rice Foundation has made a gift to Blakely and Early County that will fund the first step in a long-term effort to protect its historic and cultural foundation and launch the groundwork for a prosperous economic future. The program, called 'Early County 2055', was initiated by the Rice Family to create a healthy business climate for the local community, enhance the quality of life for local residents, and sustain growth for Blakely and its surroundings for future generations.

"Early County was a burgeoning community in the late 1800s," said Charles B. Rice Sr., the director of the Rice Foundation. "Over the years it has experienced an economic decline primarily because of the changing national economic focus. The intent of this gift is not only to help the community preserve its assets – a charming, close knit southern community, great location, low cost of living and rich heritage, but also to enable them to merge its history with a viable economic future for growth and prosperity."

Charles Rice, the founder of Barton Protective Services Inc., an international security firm headquartered in Atlanta, GA, grew up in Blakely where his parents settled in the 1930's. "My roots are in this community and I am grateful to have had the opportunity to grow up in this area of Georgia. It is a wonderful place with a valuable heritage that we want to help preserve," Rice said. "The community provided a rich and prosperous life to my parents and served as an anchor for the development of my own personal and professional values."

Catherine Rice, co-founder of the foundation, echoes those sentiments.

"Blakely holds a special place in

our hearts," she said. "The area gave our family its legacy and now we want to give something back to these wonderful people and great community."

Like many rural southern towns changes in the national economy have had a negative economic impact on Blakely and Early County over the years. The shift from a primarily agrarian system of small farms to a more diversified economic structure of farming combined with service and manufacturing has been slow, due in part to people migrating to jobs in larger cities. "As farms became more efficient the need for workers diminished. Population declines caused the economy of areas like Early County to wane," said Charles Rice. "Over the last few years, however, we are seeing an increase in some populations in rural areas around the country with people seeking lifestyle changes and professional opportunity."

In its preliminary planning stages, the 'Early County 2055' initiative will focus on raising the quality of life for current residents while developing a long-term vision and master plan for the future. The planning process, scheduled to get underway in early 2006, will be funded completely by the Rice Foundation and engineered by the Miami-based land planning and development advisory firm, PlaceMakers.

The plan will be crafted around the historic and cultural underpinnings that already exist in the county. Once completed, the execution strategy will involve the local community leadership and working committees that will carry out the necessary steps to ensure its



success. "Our intention is to act as a catalyst, helping Blakely and Early County transition from an agriculturally based economy to a thriving service and knowledge economy that will provide new industry opportunities," Barton Rice, executive director of the Rice Foundation, said. "We will help to develop a plan and establish the process, then it will be up to the local leadership to make the plan a reality." Barton Rice, the son of Charles and Catherine, envisions the implementation to include recruiting industry to the area, procuring state and federal grants and enlisting the help of the state university systems.

PlaceMakers Principal Nathan Norris said the project would focus on three areas – a long-term vision that builds upon the existing strengths of the area, crafting a physical plan that will help the community realize its vision, and generating a successful blueprint for executing the plan. "We intend to get the entire community involved in this process so everyone is committed to working on rejuvenating the community and participating in its success," Norris said. "Our job is to create a place people love that will stand the test of time and provide long-term economic stability to the people who live there."

Other Georgia localities, such a nearby Miller County, have been successful in revitalizing their local economies through a variety of community-driven projects that integrate local strategies and are supported by common community goals.

"Southwest Georgia could become a destination of choice for people looking to relocate for a better quality of life that also offers social and economic

opportunity," according to Barton Rice. "That is why 'Early County 2055' is so important. Its goal is to bond the community together, to expand upon existing industry while developing new economies that will grow and prosper." He added that the initiative's recently established visual identity would soon be seen around the community – a brilliant blue and green logo that symbolizes growth and prosperity. "Our new logo reflects the rich heritage and the past with an eye to the future," said Barton Rice. "When community residents see this logo around town they will know that the project is real and the future of Early County and Blakely is promising

Stanley Houston, a local business owner in Blakely and a founding member of "Early County 2055", agrees. "The town and the county has experienced a downturn of economic growth over the last 20 years," he said. "With the help of this gift, which intends to provide direction to and develop opportunity for the community, the area will get the jump start it needs to turn itself around economically."

"The 'Early County 2055' initiative will concentrate on creating a partnership and cooperative spirit among all people in Blakely and Early County, providing the existing residents with new proficiencies and capabilities that will move them into the future," said Barton Rice, "We are looking forward to bringing all community groups together for a week long brainstorming session in the early part of 2006. We want the communities of Early County – those folks who are the backbone of the culture and tradition of this beautiful area of Georgia – to make this plan come true. We will do all we can to help them do that."