

*Remarks for the
1st Annual Governor's Communities of Excellence Awards Program
July 24, 2002*

Good afternoon. Today, we celebrate what makes Mississippi special – the communities found across the state and the people who make up those communities. The Governor's Communities of Excellence Awards Program was created to recognize outstanding achievement by communities in the use of CDBG and HOME funds.

It's been said that "without a sense of caring, there can be no sense of community." The communities we recognize today illustrate just how important that sense of caring can be – a sense of caring about everything from infrastructure to housing, from jobs to playgrounds.

Each of the communities being honored today has shown us what it means to be a community. It's time for us to show them our appreciation for what they mean to Mississippi.

There are six categories of awards to be presented.

The first category is for Best Overall Municipal Project. The winner, for their Senior Citizens Center, is the City of Gautier. Accepting the award is Mayor Kenneth Toler.

This Senior Citizens Center provides a place for seniors to gather for activities in a park-like setting. It has increased volunteerism, provided a place for educational classes, helped incorporate these elderly Mississippians into the community as a whole, and promoted Gautier as a great place to retire.

Congratulations, Mayor Toler.

The second category is for Best Overall County Project. The winner is the West Holmes Water Association for their installation of water meters. The award for Holmes County will be accepted by Chancery Clerk Dorothy Jean Ford.

With these water improvements, the West Holmes Water Association extended service to 157 households, decreased their operating costs, and became eligible to apply for additional funds from the USDA. New revenues collected by the association also allow them to maintain the system more efficiently.

This was the first self-help program in the state, with most of the residents doing the work. This effort brought the entire community together, working for a common goal.

Congratulations, Ms. Ford.

The next award is for Best CDBG Economic Development Project, and the winner is the Town of Noxapater for the Noxapater / Flower Ridge Water Project. Accepting the award is Noxapater Mayor Tommie Gardner.

This project prevented Choctaw Glove, the primary industry in Noxapater, from having to relocate. The company has now expanded its workforce, and is going to serve the new Nissan facility as a Tier 2 supplier.

The project also greatly improved the water quality for the citizens. And, by combining the Noxapater and Flower Ridge water associations, the community was able to save \$500,000 in the costs to improve the two systems.

Congratulations, Mayor Gardner.

Our next award is for Best CDBG Public Facilities. Mayor F. L. “Hank” Smith is accepting the award on behalf of the City of Natchez, for their “Sprayground” project.

This park brings children and families from outside the county and the state for summer fun. It has created a sense of pride in the community, removing the vandalism that once existed at the location and lowering the city’s liability at the site.

It is also a great example of innovate, cost-efficient recreation – the total cost of the project was only \$120,000. Congratulations, Mayor Smith.

The fifth award is for Best Homebuyer Assistance, and the winner is the University of Southern Mississippi Institute of Disability Studies, Mississippi Home of Your Own – a home ownership program for individuals with disabilities.

Accepting the award are Vicki Killingsworth and Royal Walker.

This home ownership program helps disabled citizens fulfill the dream we all share, that of owning our own home. This program is an excellent example of partnership making a difference for people who might need a helping hand.

Our final award today is for Best Homeowner Rehabilitation, and the winner is the Town of Goodman. The award is accepted by Mayor Debra Mabry, the mayor of – in her words – “the little town that’s making a difference.”

This project allowed six families to move from substandard housing to decent, safe, sanitary housing and created a sense of pride in the community. According to Mayor Mabry, “it restored hope to disillusioned people.”

Each of the cities and towns here today have worked hard for this honor, and I want to thank them for their commitment to building a better Mississippi. Congratulations on a job well done.