

Sen. Miller seeks to spur growth in 'Black Belt'

By Noelle Straub

One year after he was sworn into the Senate, Zell Miller (D-Ga.) is planning to introduce his first major piece of legislation — aimed at creating a regional commission to spur economic development in the “Southern Black Belt.”

Miller will call for a study on the feasibility of establishing an agency to help one of the most impoverished rural areas in America, an 11-state region the size of France that includes 380 counties with African-American populations greater than 25 percent.

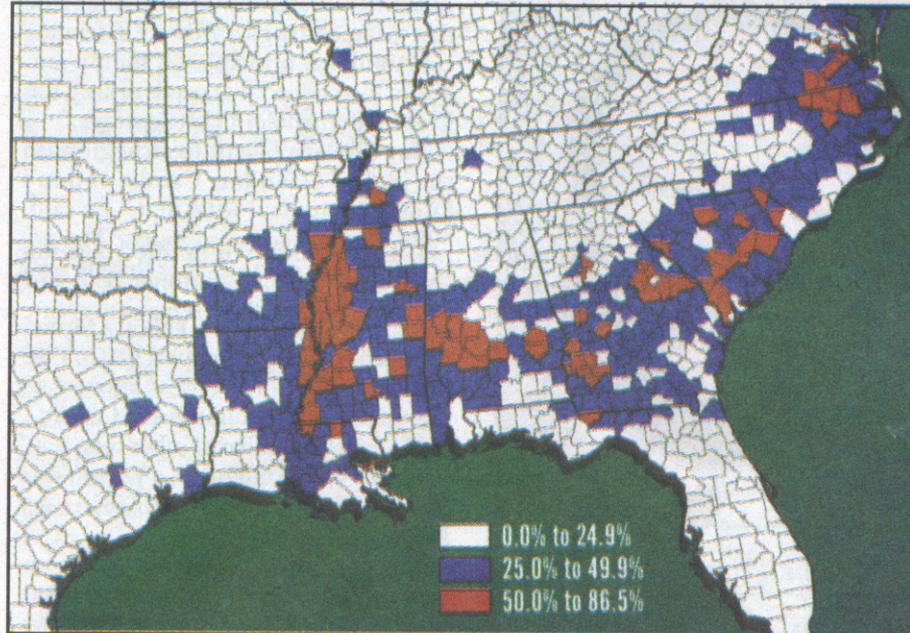
Modeled after the federally funded Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC) established in 1965, Miller's proposed agency would address infant mortality, provide job training and improve water and sewer services to a region with a total population of about 22.6 million.

“We concern ourselves about the Third World and all of its problems, and this is sort of the Third World in America,” he told The Hill.

Miller is asking for \$250,000 for a six-month study to be included in the Energy and Water appropriations bill, and expects the funding to be approved.

Miller, who grew up in the Appalachian region of northern Georgia, noted that most of his high school classmates left the region because there was little opportunity.

“That is no longer the case,” he said. “There is job training there. It's not as isolated there. One of the statistics is: The region's poverty has been cut in half. Infant mortality has been reduced by two-thirds. High school graduates have doubled.”



MAP COURTESY OF DOUGLAS C. BACHTEL, PROFESSOR, THE UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA

Sen. Miller's proposal would aid the “Southern Black Belt” of 380 counties with an African-American population of at least 25 percent.

Funding would start on a small scale but grow each year, much like the ARC, whose budget for the current fiscal year is \$66 million for economic and social development with an additional \$390 million slated for highway development.

Miller became involved in the ARC as a state senator and later served as chairman while governor of Georgia. The commission is made up of the governors of 13 Appalachian states and a presidential appointee, and local development boards also participate.

“I was there and lived it and saw it first-

hand,” he said. “One of the main things it's done is make this very remote region of the United States accessible.”

Miller envisions the new commission working like the ARC, with projects that would include “the same type of job training, working on infant mortality rate, providing water and sewer services.”

One ARC-funded project in Miller's home state was featured in May in *Time* magazine. A rural school in an impoverished county received a grant to give middle-school students laptop computers that connect to the Internet via in-

frared sensors in classroom ceilings. Standardized test scores among the students have since risen, attendance has improved, and disciplinary referrals are down, according to the magazine.

The “Southern Black Belt” includes counties in Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, North and South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas and Virginia. The term was first used by Booker T. Washington in his 1901 book *Up From Slavery*, according to University of Georgia research.

The area has low levels of infrastructure and educational attainment, poor access to healthcare and intergenerational poverty.

A conservative Democrat who often votes with Republicans and supported President Bush's tax cut plan, Miller supports establishing a federal commission in this case.

“All during the days of my political career I was watching what the ARC was doing in my home area and thinking this works,” Miller said. “I've been in those counties in Georgia a dozen times over and have seen the poverty, the need over and beyond what the state could furnish. We need the strength of the federal government involved.”

Although he has not spoken to his Senate colleagues about his proposal, Miller predicts widespread support for it. “You would think this is something that would have been thought of and tried on the federal level a long time ago,” he said.

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