

The Atlanta Constitution

Black Belt needs an economic lift

One of the major pillars of Lyndon Johnson's "Great Society," the Appalachian Regional Commission has had a profoundly positive effect on what was a generation ago an isolated and all-too-impooverished region in this land of (mostly) plenty.

Now Sen. Zell Miller (D-Ga.) is asking an obvious follow-up question: Why not set up a counterpart to the Appalachian agency to boost a similar, multistate swath of economic sluggishness and social underachievement? Why not get at the root of problems in the so-called Black Belt, which stretches from Texas through 90 of Georgia's 159 counties and northward into Virginia?

Miller's recommendation has considerable merit — never mind the knee-jerk opposition that creation of another federal agency is bound to attract. Since 1965, the Appalachian Regional Commission has funneled federal dollars and know-how into the Southern hill country with commendable results. For instance, the number of residents living in poverty has been cut in half, infant mortality reduced by two-thirds and the number of high school graduates doubled.

Across Appalachia, federal funds have been directed at construction of roads, sewers and water systems, at general and vocational edu-

cation and job-training, at public health programs, even at small-business start-ups. Transplanting these kinds of services to areas of need throughout the Black Belt seems a natural extension of this poverty-fighting initiative.

The Black Belt, once synonymous with the Cotton Belt when cotton was the region's premier crop, plainly shows the ill effects of years of neglect. A fifth of its 25 million inhabitants lives in households below the federal poverty line — \$16,954 a year in earnings for a family of four. The area abounds with signs of decline: stagnant job creation, higher-than-usual percentages of elderly and children in its population, high rates of pregnancy, infant mortality and chronic diseases like circulatory problems and diabetes.

Miller isn't suggesting that Washington rush in and throw money at these maladies. Sensibly, he recommends that Congress appropriate \$250,000 for a feasibility study of a Black Belt stimulus package encompassing educational, economic and public works programs. When Congress returns from recess, it should approve the study and see if America can make a world of difference in what has come to be known as this country's Third World.

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