CHAIRMAN JAMES: Mr. Bill Baker?

MR. BAKER: Yes. Thank you.

CHAIRMAN JAMES: I'm going to ask our timer to move in a little bit further. I think you're out of the line of view of our -- and they can't see you.

COMMISSIONER LOESCHER: Madam Chairman, if the gentleman who just spoke, if he could leave his testimony, I'm sure you have more in there.

CHAIRMAN JAMES: All of them are invited to do that.

Mr. Baker?

MR. BAKER: Yes. Madam Chairwoman and person and distinguished members of the commission. My name is Bill Baker. I'm vice-president of human resources for Grand Casino, Tunica, and I'm here to share with a partnership that I think is making a tremendous difference in the Mississippi Delta.

It was an idea, which came to life in Gulfport, Mississippi in 1993, when Gulfport -- Grand Casino Gulfport adopted a public housing project called Lander Homes. Our experiences in helping the residents of that neighborhood regain control of their community and begin to celebrate life and hope for their future was the genesis of our Adopt-a-Town projects in the Delta.

On any given day of the year, there are 500 to 800 job openings spread among the casinos in Tunica County. With our robust economy, the north Mississippian-Memphis job markets can no longer meet the staffing needs of the casinos.

The well documented poverty of Tunica County in the years before gaming arrived is beginning to disappear. However, you only have to drive 30 or 40 miles south to realize that
opportunities in Tunica County have had little influence on the residents within the scores of small towns which dot the Delta.

The lack of reliable transportation and a large population which had never held steady employment were seemingly insurmountable barriers.

L. Jones, manager of the Mississippi Employment Security Commission office in Clarksdale, Mississippi was contacted to assist in identifying the areas of highest unemployment within his jurisdiction. Marks and Jonestown, with unemployment in excess of 28 percent each, were chosen.

The decision was to develop a community based employment program which would be supported locally by the mayors, church ministers and influential business leaders within each community. The process begins with a bi-weekly job fair in each town to recruit candidates for a one-week job readiness training program which takes place within each of the adopted communities.

Upon completion of the training, jobs are offered immediately to those who have successfully completed job readiness. For those without reliable transportation, Grand Casino provides transportation for up to six months.

Thanks to Tulahoma Community College's skill tech center, we have been able to develop relevant instructional material and outstanding training support for these initiatives.

We continue to work with the Mississippi Department of Transportation and the Aaron Henry Community Health Center in Clarksdale to develop an effective rural transportation system, which I'm so happy to say is now in the progress of being completed.
The opportunities to positively impact the population of the Mississippi Delta seem endless. We know that many of the people in Jonestown and Marks are beginning to dream about a future they never thought possible only a few short months ago. So what's happened?

Adopt-a-Town process began in September 1997. To date, we have employed 235 individuals from this program. Their retention rate is 81 percent versus a retention rate of 39 percent for our overall population, which is phenomenal given welfare to work statistics that you hear from around the country.

We have hired 323 associates overall into our workforce in the last year that have come off welfare rolls directly into our employment. We have supported our commitment to these communities by supporting their child care center.

We've redone a community center in Jonestown. We sent ten kids to a basketball camp this summer and we had a day camp for 200 children in Jonestown this past summer. It's a partnership that's working. Thank you.

CHAIRMAN JAMES: Thank you very much.