On Tuesday, September 30th the Russell Library hosted the first of three public forums in the community of Tifton, Georgia – a town located about 200 miles south of Athens, Georgia. The topic, “Pathways to Prosperity: Choosing a Future for Your Community,” brought out 25 attendees, including several candidates for public office and individuals engaged in a diverse range of professions in the surrounding area. The discussion was lively and established many shared goals for the future of this community.

Dedicated volunteers Dr. Margaret Holt and Sharon Gibson served as co-moderators for the forum. Holt, a retired UGA professor, is a longtime associate of the National Issues Forums Institute and has moderated numerous forums in communities across the country. This fall, she has co-moderated several forums as part of the Georgia Deliberations initiative by the Russell Library, the Jimmy Carter Library, and partners around the state. Meanwhile Gibson, a University of Georgia Cooperative Extension family and consumer science educator, brought a special connection to this deliberation – she is a former resident of Tifton. Both moderators directed a smooth and impartial discussion, guiding attendees through three approaches to achieving greater prosperity. Russell Library staff members Jill Severn and Jan Levinson were on hand to record and observe the deliberation.

The topic of this forum hit close to home, especially after this week’s news from Wall Street, and inspired some great discussion. In recent decades the South has been transformed by increased wealth and population, but the region is still grappling with how to manage that growth and what these changes mean for the future of individual communities. Notable moments in the deliberation with Tifton residents:
• Moderators began by asking the group what, if anything made the South a distinct place. Responses ranged from descriptions of small-town living to comments about poverty, rural life, and the high rate of illiteracy.

• The crowd largely criticized Approach 1. Comments suggested that before employing a “trickle-down” approach by bringing more jobs to the area, you have to combat poverty and illiteracy in the region. You have to create a strong work force before attracting the right kind of businesses.

• One citizen astutely commented that before you can pick out a path to prosperity, you have to decide what prosperity means to your community. He noted that it isn’t always about money, but about the quality of life in a place.

• The crowd seemed to favor Approach 2, investing in people first. They suggested establishing more informal, community-based education opportunities rather than depending solely on public education.

• Everyone favored taking a smart approach to managing growth, citing examples of poorly managed growth in nearby cities and recognizing that good zoning and public-private partnerships would most benefit Tifton.

For more information on the Russell Forum for Civic Life in Georgia, visit http://www.libs.uga.edu/russell/rfclg, call (706) 542-5788, or email russellforum@gmail.com