

Illinois Humanities presents “Cultural Sustainability and the Pursuit of Community” in East St. Louis on Oct. 25

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EAST ST. LOUIS - Illinois Humanities will present “[Cultural Sustainability and the Pursuit of Community](#),” the second event in its statewide program series, *The Country and the City: Common Ground in the Prairie State?*, in East St. Louis on Thursday, October 25.

The panel discussion with audience participation will take place in the SIUE East St. Louis Center Building D multipurpose room, 601 James R. Thompson Boulevard in East St. Louis, on Thursday, October 25. Doors will open and free refreshments will be available at 5:30 PM. The program will begin at 6 and conclude by 8. Admission will be free of charge.

The event is part of a year-long, statewide initiative featuring text-based discussions of issues that affect both rural and urban Illinois communities, involving panelists who are well-versed in those issues from both perspectives.

Three panelists representing urban communities and three representing rural communities will participate. Those representing urban communities include

- Cindy Reed, poet and cultural commentator from East St. Louis, doctoral student in American Studies at Saint Louis University, and fellowship recipient of the Mellon Foundation’s Divided City Initiative
- Leone Jose Bicchieri, executive director of Working Family Solidarity, labor organizer, and economic justice advocate from Chicago
- Vincent Thomas, a Rock Island Township trustee, journalist, and retired director of the Project NOW Community Action Agency, serving Rock Island, Henry, and Mercer counties.

Panelists representing rural communities include

- Jim Nowlan, a former state representative, syndicated columnist, political consultant, author of books on Illinois state government, and president of Stark County Communications in Toulon
- Jane Ann Petty, co-owner of Free Press Coffee House and the William Watson Hotel in Pittsfield, both housed in historic buildings that she and her husband, Jonas Petty, renovated
- Claudia Zabala, a teacher of sixth grade and English as a second language, Beardstown Middle School, Beardstown.

The panelists will address questions such as these:

- How can urban and rural communities sustain their defining cultural features while also being culturally inclusive?
- How can they maintain their cultural distinctiveness and vitality and their sense of place in the face of economic, technological, and social changes?

- Is it possible to achieve a mutually beneficial relationship between cultural conservation and economic development, or are those two pursuits intrinsically opposed?

The discussion will draw upon the panelists' experiences, as well as Part I of "Philadelphia Flowers," a poem by Roberta Hill (1996), available at <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/48659/philadelphia-flowers>. Anyone interested in the program is invited (but not required) to read the poem in advance. Members of the audience will have opportunities to join the conversation during the event.

Kelli Covey, principal of the Covey Group, will moderate the discussion. An experienced facilitator of text-based dialogue, Covey lives in Chicago but is originally from a rural community in Texas.

"We're proud to host this discussion at the SIUE East St. Louis Center. It will be a great opportunity for residents of East St. Louis and other cities and small towns to learn from one another," said Howard Ramsby, professor of English at SIUE and coordinator of the East St. Louis Action Research Project.

In conjunction with both the Illinois Bicentennial and the Illinois Humanities-facilitated statewide tour of *Crossroads: Change in Rural America*, a new Museum on Main Street exhibition from the Smithsonian Institution, *The Country and the City: Common Ground in the Prairie State?* addresses a question that has been in the news recently but is as old as our state itself: to what extent can rural and urban Illinoisans find common ground on issues that affect both the country and the city?

"Our social and political discourse appears to reflect division between urban and rural Illinoisans, but our visits to city neighborhoods and rural communities throughout the state have led us to wonder whether their residents may have more in common than they realize," said Matt Meacham, program manager for statewide engagement with Illinois Humanities.

"We hope this series will expand rural and urban Illinoisans' understandings of one another's viewpoints, concerns, and values through face-to-face conversation and engagement with humanities texts," Meacham commented.

Illinois Humanities presents *The Country and the City* in cooperation with the Covey Group, the Illinois Institute for Rural Affairs at Western Illinois University, and Southern Illinois University Edwardsville's East St. Louis Action Research Project, as well as the Smithsonian Institution in conjunction with the Illinois tour of the Museum on Main Street exhibition, [*Crossroads: Change in Rural America*](#).

Each program in the series will consist of a rural edition and an urban edition. The rural edition of "Cultural Sustainability and the Pursuit of Community" took place in Pittsfield on September 25.

The series will continue with the rural version of "Land Use and Environmental Ethics" at Dickson Mounds Museum near Lewistown on November 15 and the urban version of that program at the American Indian Center in Chicago on December 6.

About Illinois Humanities:

Illinois Humanities strengthens the social, political, and economic fabric of Illinois through constructive conversation and community engagement. Founded in 1974 as the state affiliate of the National Endowment for the Humanities, Illinois Humanities is the only statewide proponent of the public humanities in Illinois.

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