

# IRAQ DIARY

Sanford City Manager in Iraq

## NEW STRATEGIES TO IMPROVE IRAQI LIVES

I had the opportunity recently to participate in an activity that had a very immediate impact on Iraqi citizens. I am here in Iraq as an advisor (on fiscal and budget matters) to the Provincial Reconstruction Team located in the province of Al-Muthanna in southern Iraq. Citizens of Al-Muthanna Province receive low-level basic services, as it suffers from high unemployment rates and basic services such as water, electricity and proper housing are not available. It also suffers from poor environmental and health conditions and high illiteracy and poverty rates. The citizens of this area have proven very receptive to aid programs designed to improve conditions for the Iraqi people. One recent example was the recent medical/veterinary civil action program.

There were hundreds of people on site and ready to receive medical attention. Doctors and medics from the U.S. Armed Forces and the Iraqi Army joined together to treat over 900 patients during the day. In addition, Major General Martin Robeson from the US Command in Baghdad joined our group in distributing 200 wheel chairs to the disabled and 100 pair of crutches. Several thousands of dollars of medications were distributed as well.

Staff was able to directly treat over 600 assorted sheep, cattle and goats and distribute another 2,000 doses of medica-



tions to treat animals in the province and prevent disease.

In addition to sponsoring this type of event, our PRT has been improving schools, repairing roads, developing water and wastewater programs, improving agricultural development and promoting the One Laptop per Child program to improve global access to information to children. Over the past year the team has been able to obligate about \$1.3 million in projects and we have a couple of dozen of new projects in the pipeline.

So while activity is going on in the central government to improve coordination, ordinary Americans and other expatriates are working in the provinces on a daily basis improving the lives of ordinary citizens who were largely neglected by their own government.

Al-Muthanna is one of

**About this article:** This article was written by Sanford City Manager Sherman Yehl. He is on a six-month leave of absence as a local government consultant for the International City/County Management Association in Iraq. He is a member of a Provincial Reconstruction Team that will be training and mentoring provincial councils on local government services.

the oldest inhabited areas throughout history, dating back to the Old Stone Age.

Al-Muthanna fell under Ottoman, Persian and British occupation and has suffered a great deal of underdevelopment, injustice, poverty, exploitation and ignorance. The spark of the Twentieth Revolution against the British occupation started and spread to the rest of Iraq in 1920. Politically its inhabitants were not considered supporters of Saddam Hussein and as a result the province was largely ignored by the central government over the past couple of decades.

Al-Muthanna Province is mostly inhabited by ancient Arab tribes and most of its population is engaged in agriculture and herding.

Although it did not receive a lot of press, a major milestone was reached in the past few weeks in Iraq. I had the pleasure of serving as an official observer to this event which was attended by the Iraqi Prime Minister as well.

The central Ministry of Planning formally accepted 18 development strategies prepared and submitted by the local provincial councils on March 2 in Baghdad.

In 2006 the MoP requested each Iraqi province to produce a development strategy to improve the efficiency of the work of the central government's planning agency.

Why is this a big deal? For years there was a top-down approach to public policy in Iraq. Worse, it was segregated by the 31 separate federal ministries. This would be akin to all decisions affecting not only Florida and the other 49 states, but all of the counties, municipalities and school districts receiving all direction from Washington, D.C. It is not a system designed for efficiency, effectiveness or creativity.

These new development strategies provide a four to five year outlook across the service sectors that most effect provincial life on a daily basis. The really good news about all this is that these strategies were created



Iraqi residents of Al-Muthanna gather for medical check-ups conducted by both U.S. and Iraqi army doctors and medics.

through a participatory process that required consensus building among elected officials, business representatives, traditional and religious leaders and citizens. Through this process a priority of needs was developed. While in many cases the "needs" far outstrip the financial capacity for funding, it does provide a roadmap for the future and how priorities are to be funded. Budgeting, after all, is policy.

One of the problems in Iraq associated with local government has been a lack of clear legal obligation. Also enacted in the past month has been the provincial powers act which now gives this legal basis to the three sub-national levels of government in Iraq. The fact that local provincial leaders will be talking to the central ministries means that there should be better coordination in the planning of public investments. The Provincial Development Strategy will institutionalize this coordination. This is a good thing and it is another positive step towards democracy and transparency in Iraq.



Photo by David Roberson  
Sherman Yehl (bottom right, in front of woman in head covering) attends meeting to help organize provincial governments in Iraq.