

Expansion of Southeast Nebraska EDGE Program”

Johnson County (also on behalf of Otoe and Nemaha Counties)

The Rural Enterprise Assistance Program (REAP), Southeast EDGE Coalition, River Country Economic Development Corporation, Auburn Economic Development and City of Tecumseh Economic Development have become experts at investing penny upon penny of the \$6,000 BECA (Building Entrepreneurial Communities Act) grant awarded their partnership in 2006 (combined with their matching funds). One need only consider the nearly dizzying array of classes and services currently available to small business owners in Johnson, Otoe and Nemaha counties to see the careful planning and true value that's been built into each and every offering.

For example, to communicate quickly far and wide, *The Leading Edge* newsletter was created and is emailed quarterly to more than 300 businesses, individuals, media outlets, and resource providers located in southeast Nebraska. As word spreads, the list grows.

A BECA after hours networking event held in Nebraska City and Auburn attracted 80 people, with both events promoted simultaneously through invites, and an email campaign. Individuals from the Auburn Development Council, River Country Economic Development Corporation, the University of Nebraska-Lincoln (UNL) Food Processing Center, Nebraska Business Development Center, Rural Enterprise Assistance Project and Southeast Nebraska EDGE Coalition were there to answer questions, and local small businesses donated food.

Training events have included “The EBay Way”, “E-Business/E-Selling on the Internet”, “Podcasting for Tourism, Business and Communities”, “EBay for Business” and “Website Content” in Auburn, and “Marketing Basics—4 P’s of Marketing in Nebraska City all taught by university extension educators. “The EBay Way” has been so popular, in fact, that people are on a waiting list for future offerings. Several of the classes actually traveled to requesting communities by way of the BIT Mobile. The Business Information Technology (BIT) Mobile is housed in a big silver travel-type trailer with Husker red lettering that is hitched on to the back of a truck. Inside are 14 workstations featuring laptop computers and numerous educational technology tools.

“The BECA grant has been a tremendous tool for our region, allowing us to provide training opportunities for our current business owners and future entrepreneurs to strengthen the regional economy,” said Pat Haverty, executive director of River Country Economic Development Corp.

The first Southeast Nebraska Regional Economic Development Summit held in Nebraska City in July 2007 drew 130 attendees hungry for information on demographics, workforce and population, and how to set up and/or become involved in regional collaborations. A post summit survey sparked the idea for a Move-Back campaign to recruit former residents, and to startup, perhaps one of the partnership's most successful endeavors to date—the I²E Club (Inventors, Investors and Entrepreneurs Club).

“This initial summit opened the door for future collaboration leading to the creation of the I²E club and future discussions regarding a recruitment campaign in southeast Nebraska,” Haverty said. “Representatives from several southeast Nebraska communities have met several times and are now planning on applying for another BECA grant to implement a population recruitment campaign.” I²E club director Dr. Connie Reimers-Hild, unit leader of UNL’s Kimmel Education & Research Center in Nebraska City, hosts the monthly second Tuesday meetings –same time (5:30 p.m.), same place (the Center)—to provide continuity.

“While we weren’t part of the initial BECA [grant] process, it’s still wonderful to see all of them working together as a region to revitalize the area, grow communities and entrepreneurship,” Dr. Reimers-Hild said. “I’m really thankful they pulled us into the group as a partner. After all, we’re all taxpayers and we’re all in this together. We all want our areas to be vital and successful as places to make livings and raise families.”

Each meeting features different invitees who lead networking exercises and exercises for inventors and entrepreneurs operating small businesses. An I²E planning committee, which oversees each

monthly program, includes members from the private sector, nonprofits and the like. The mayor of Auburn is on the committee as is a representative from REAP, a banker and an office manager. The first meeting in January 2008 attracted 55 people from 14 communities, including Lincoln, Omaha, and even across the river from Iowa. . . “a lot of tire kickers wanting to find out what this was all about,” Reimers-Hild said.

The next month’s meeting drew about 45 people from 13 communities, not as many service providers, but more business owners and potential business owners. May’s meeting drew about 22 attendees—14 who had attended nearly all previous meetings and eight new participants. “Of course we expected that as we got closer to summer, what with school letting out and other activities increasing for people and families that attendance would dwindle somewhat,” Reimers-Hild said.

The club has taken off in ways even the planners possibly didn’t foresee. A small group of inventors that regularly attend the I²E meetings formed their own independent group, which meets separately. People of all ages, from 20s to retirees have turned out, intrigued by the prospect of starting and managing their own businesses, or moving



their ideas forward. For most, it boils down to money, whether it's the couple who are expecting their second baby and in need of additional income, or retirees who are being forced to supplement their retirement checks.

We realized we need to do things differently in our rural areas. So far, interest has been really high and we've had some great impacts in a short amount of time," Dr. Reimers-Hild said. "We need to make sure we continue to be innovative in meeting the needs of our club members." One person's valuable contacts resulted in the possibility of getting permission to use another person's commercial kitchen, saving them the expense of having to build their own. Another person learned about and enrolled in classes offered by UNL's Food Processing Center. Another got help with redesigning a website from a volunteer web designer. Yet another person is now selling produce through Lincoln's Open Harvest natural foods cooperative.

"Connie Hancock, UNL Extension Educator located in Sidney, Neb., taught people about podcasting in the BIT Mobile," Reimers-Hild said. "Now she's working with partners and exploring the possibility of starting a club in her part of the state, and



people in central Nebraska have expressed interest in starting their own chapter, too, so there's excitement building about not only starting new clubs, but connecting these clubs via Internet using distance-delivery methods or other forms of communications technology."

Area newspapers and radio stations also have gotten involved. "We've had wonderful media partners. The *Nebraska City News-Press* covers all our meetings and KMA

Radio in Shenandoah, Iowa, has been excited and happy to hear about what's going on. We've had a number of other small radio stations and newspapers call for information, but these two have been exceptionally giving," Dr. Reimers-Hild said. "We were also featured in great articles in both the *Omaha World-Herald* (which featured a photo of February speaker Rhonda Nielsen) and *Lincoln Journal Star*." The club's reputation has also traveled to Des Moines, Iowa, where the Iowa Department of Commerce contacted Dr. Reimers-Hild for more information.

For information about the initial \$6,000 BECA grant, contact Pat Haverty at 402-873-4293, or rcedc@windstream.net.

For information about the I'E club, contact Connie Reimers-Hild at 402-873-3166 or creimers2@unl.edu