

[print](#)

County leaders eye CEC project

by Scott Baughman

08.12.10 - 09:32 pm

RUTHERFORDTON — Entrepreneurs in Rutherford County might soon get a boost from Advantage West and their Certified Entrepreneurial Community (CEC) program.

A Rutherford County Roundtable meeting was held Thursday to discuss the program and how to get it started in the area with about 20 business leaders from around the county attending.

“An entrepreneur is much more likely to put down roots in an area and invest there,” said Pam Lewis, Advantage West senior vice president of entrepreneurial development. “We have worked with our colleges like Western Carolina and Appalachian to build up a network of entrepreneurs. We learned a lot through that network and found they need leadership in their own community. If a business owner has a problem and their hair is on fire, they need someone local they can call.”

Advantage West — an economic development group for Western North Carolina — sent representatives to the county to discuss economic and entrepreneur development.

“The CEC program was created in 2007 to assist local communities with entrepreneurial efforts,” Lewis said. “There are seven communities who have become certified. In order to be one, someone from the community must apply for it.”

After training, the prospective CEC is encouraged to catalogue their resources — including access to groups like SCORE, their economic development commission and their local chamber of commerce.

The list would also help start-ups find ways to get funding or loans or business advice.

Lewis also said the CEC program hopes to encourage communities to come up with comprehensive plans for broadband access.

A local unit of government must sign a letter of intent to start the CEC process. It could be the County Commission, Rutherfordton, Forest City, Spindale, Lake Lure, etc.

County Attorney Beth Miller is a member of the board at Advantage West, so many in attendance thought the commission should spearhead the effort.

“I think this needs the support of the county commissioners, so it wouldn’t be just a Forest City or just a Rutherfordton thing,” said Linda Parks, who operates Fireside Books and Gifts in Forest City.

Some in attendance expressed concern that ideas like the CEC program often get started in Rutherford County but lack follow-through.

“We’ve been down this road before,” said Omer Causby, who serves on the Economic Development Commission board. “We seem to gather a list of resource and then it just dies. I think I’m going to jump off a building if I see another strategic plan.”

Parks agreed and added, “I see so many little organizations trying so hard at wonderful things, but there is no sense of control. I don’t have someone coming by the store and asking me how my business is going or what I need. There are many businesses in the county that will have generations of family growing and expanding their business and ideas if they can survive today. But right now, you’ve got to visit 25 websites to find out what is going on in this county.”

Rutherfordton Mayor Jimmy Dancy said, “I think this is an area that is important for us to be moving in. The Rutherford County Chamber of Commerce has a lot of assets working in your favor to assist us. I hope the chamber will continue to be a part of the progress we need to make.”

Rick Austin, president of the chamber, was in attendance and agreed with Dancy in principle.

“I agree that we need to learn how to play nice together to make a program like this work,” Austin said.

The group will now approach the county commission about a start-up.

Contact Baughman via e-mail at sbaughman@thedigitalcourier.com.

© thedigitalcourier.com 2010