



## Back in business

### Revived Cass County Economic Development Corp. finds SUCCESS

By MONICA LUNDQUIST  
Cass County Correspondent

PINE RIVER -- Cass County Economic Development Corp. President Dave Johnson finally sees measurable success in the form of new and better jobs for people who live here and spend their money here after a decade of CCEDC evolution.

Part of the reason is the state's new JOBZ business incentive program, he said, but that has been only a stimulus to make more people aware there can be other business assistance available to help business owners expand.

CCEDC also now finally has a coordinator, Gail Levenson, who has expertise with business packaging and loan application processes to offer businesses, he said.

She currently is working with 29 new and existing business owners to develop or update their business plans. Levenson helps those whose plans show success potential to obtain gap loans to fill their needs between what banks are willing to lend and what their plans show they need.

Few of those 29 will qualify for the JOBZ program, she said, but a renewed relationship between CCEDC and the Small Business Development Center in Brainerd is making federal Small Business Administration money available to more qualified Cass County businesses now, Levenson said.

Not only is Levenson working with businesses, but Small Business Development Center consultants also have been working with Cass businesses wanting to expand or start a new business.

Local business memberships provide the base support for CCEDC. Cass County provided some funding in 2004, but whether CCEDC will get county funding in the final 2005 budget has yet to be decided.

Johnson said CCEDC needs a minimum of \$70,000 per year to operate effectively.

Cass County Economic Development began about a decade ago as a Cass County government department. The first director focused effectively on tourism promotion and developed a tourism Web site.

However, that benefited only one important segment of the county economy. Cass County commissioners lost interest in funding it when the program

failed to support other business sectors, so commissioners cut funding for the director's position and the department.

About a dozen business owners and executives formed the current non-profit corporation, briefly hired a second director, whose job also died from lack of funding. The CCEDC board kept it alive by donating many volunteer hours.

"We have some really good people who want to see Cass County do better, and it should," Johnson said. He gave credit to John Wiens, Longville Chamber of Commerce director; John Wetrosky, Pine River Chamber of Commerce director; and John Grimley, Walker businessman who has spent endless hours lobbying to keep Ah-Gwah-Ching alive.

The hardest part of being on the CCEDC board, Johnson said, was the volunteers he served with knew their own businesses well, but did not have the financial skills to help people whose businesses were in other fields.

The goal during that time was not to squander the money the group did receive from banks, cities, townships and the county, Johnson said.

They brought in experts from the region to offer business development seminars during the years the volunteers kept CCEDC alive. These seminars were well attended.

Early this year CCEDC contracted with Levenson to coordinate the program. She averages 27.5 hours a week. Three new businesses have started in Cass County, benefiting from some or all of the JOBZ incentives.

Those three businesses expect to employ a total of 65.5 people and will pay a minimum of \$9.50 per hour with benefits. They have spent \$5.2 million on new facilities.

Minnesota Economic Development Center at St. Cloud State University estimates spending to construct these businesses and the impact of more dollars in the community when they begin operations will indirectly create another 34 temporary construction and permanent continuing jobs as a result of money the new business operations infuse in the Cass County community.

Levenson hopes several of the 29 businesses now showing interest in starting new ventures or expanding will be able to make their business plans work with her assistance and that of the SBDC.

Nine businesses would relocate here from other counties. Two would come from out of state. The rest would be expanding local businesses.

CCEDC's additional goals include continuing to offer business seminars, developing a new Web site and offering grant writing for Cass County communities.

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