



## Membership grows

By MONICA LUNDQUIST  
Cass County Correspondent

WALKER - Cass County Economic Development Corp. had 53 members in 2005 and has signed 28 new members for 2006, President Dave Johnson told those attending its annual meeting Thursday night at Northern Lights Hotel near Walker.

"I'm extremely pleased with the consulting work Gail (Leverson) has done," he said. "We have exceeded our goals in 2005."

Leverson works as a part-time CCEDC manager to counsel businesses and help them obtain financing packages to build and expand businesses here.

She said she offers small business counseling to about 20 businesses each month. About 15 percent of the business packages she has helped complete included tax-increment financing or JOBZ designations.

In the last two years since CCEDC engaged Leverson's services, 15 business financing packages have been completed.

These businesses have created 143 new jobs in the county and represent \$12 million in new capital investment in business plants, she said. Another 20 projects are in process.

Johnson, of Anderson Brothers Construction, will retire this year from the CCEDC board after seven years as president.

"Without your dedication and leadership these things would not have happened," said Cy Struss, of First National Bank of Walker and CCEDC board member.

Also retiring from the board this year is John Wetrosky, Pine River Chamber of Commerce director and a longtime member of Pine River Economic Development Commission. He has been involved in county economic development efforts since the county program started as a department within county government in the early 1990s, then evolved into a non-profit corporation.

He said he originally became involved in economic development to try to encourage business activity, which would provide quality jobs for children raised and educated in this area. That finally is happening, he said.

CCEDC members Thursday elected Terry Freeman of Landecker and Associates in Walker and Heather Schmidt of Hengel Construction in Pillager

to fill the board vacancies.

Some of the new and expanding businesses CCEDC has helped to coordinate financing packages include the following:

Bear Pause Theatre in Hackensack: Owners Denny Wickman and Kevin Larson. Construction on the \$2 million project began Aug. 3 and is expected to take four months. It will be a four-screen theater and is expected to employ eight or nine people.

Hackensack Senior Class LLC in Hackensack: Owners Jim and Linda Johnson. Construction on this \$3.9 million 37-unit assisted living facility with swimming pool, garages and space for a medical clinic is expected to begin this fall. The business expects to employ 20 people starting next spring.

Keefe Heating and Air Conditioning of Backus: Owner Kevin Keefe. Completed a \$30,000 expansion and hired two more employees to his former four-person staff.

Leech Lake Lighting north of Longville: Owner Kurt Kalli. Construction is under way to add a lighting studio to his business building. Three new employees will be added.

Next Innovations LTD in Walker: Owner John Zacher. Built a 60,000-square foot manufacturing and distributing plant in 2004 to wholesale laser wood cut products, eye catchers and other novelty items. The business has expanded from 10 to 56 full-time employees.

North Country Foods in Walker: Owners Pat McAndrews and Tom Kuhn. This business packages and sells wild rice products to more than 1,000 retail store outlets in Minnesota, Wisconsin, Iowa, Kansas and Missouri. It recently completed a financing package to expand.

Stille Haven Hus in Walker: Owner Jim Rogen. Constructed a \$1.7 million, eight-unit residential housing facility in 2004 for mentally ill people whom northern Minnesota counties place there. The business employs 43 people and had an annual payroll of \$850,000 last year.

Trussworthy Components in Pine River: Owner Craig Anderson. Construction is under way on a building construction truss manufacturing and wholesaling plant in Pine River Industrial Park to serve contractors and lumberyards in a 30-mile radius. The business expects to employ 13 people, starting next spring.

Universal Shoreline in Backus: Owner Blair Ecker. Constructed a \$200,000 building along Highway 371 to permit the business to expand from cabin maintenance services into dock sales.

Whalen Woods Log Furniture in Sylvan Township: Owners Jim and Judy Whalen. Construction on a \$470,000 manufacturing plant is under way to serve retail outlets in Pequot Lakes, Baxter and Becker and to fill orders

received on the Internet. The business expects to relocate eight existing employees from its Pequot Lakes plant when the new building is completed and add about five more employees.

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