



Report: CCEDC has helped create 360 new jobs

CASS COUNTY

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Cass County Correspondent

WALKER - Cass County Economic Development Corp. helped businesses create 360 new jobs and make \$50 million in capital investment within the county the last four years, according to Board President Cy Struss.

He made his annual report to the membership during the CCEDC annual banquet Nov. 1 at Northern Lights Convention Center near Walker.

Gail Levenson has helped businesses as a consultant to CCEDC during that time, helping those who wanted to start new businesses or expand existing ones to create a business plan, to secure funding through a variety of sources and to meet criteria government agencies required.

This year, her position was changed to full-time CCEDC executive director. CCEDC also has hired Rachel Krumweide as Levenson's part-time clerical assistant.

In 2007, Levenson assisted Grey's Floral in Walker, Round Belly Clothing and A&B Furniture at Pine River, Sweet's Cafe and Birch Lake Cabin Wear at Hackensack and Trails RV Park at Walker. She also has worked with St. Joseph's Medical Center of Brainerd, which announced a commitment to open a clinic if a physician can be hired to staff a community medical services center at Senior Class Assisted Living in Hackensack by the fall of 2008.

Those businesses will represent 31 new jobs and generate \$1,605,000 in new capital investment.

Levenson also has arranged several basic business seminars, offered a lender's forum, provided financial analysis and started manufacturers meetings during 2007. A chamber of commerce event is being planned for 2008.

CCEDC is working toward increasing memberships for the nonprofit corporation in an effort to generate more local support to offset dependence upon grants received in the past.

Three business owners spoke during the annual meeting about how Levenson and CCEDC helped them start or expand their business.

Anna Hunstad, who owns The Shante, said Levenson helped her pin down her ideas for what type of business might fill needs of people living in and around

Pillager. She decided to open a coffee shop, which also would offer a deli menu and desserts, wireless Internet and gift shopping selections.

Leverson helped her write her business plan, secure funding and offered follow-up support after her business opened, Hunstad said. Her location near two clinics has kept the business active every day, she said.

Hunstad said she and her business partner expected people would drive through for morning coffee and rolls, but actually 60 to 70 percent of their sales have been for sandwiches, salads, pizza and desserts eaten inside their shop throughout the day.

Allan and Brenda Wiener started A & B Furniture in 1995 in St. Cloud, manufacturing traditionally designed, well-constructed unfinished furniture to sell to the wholesale market.

Since they moved their business to a new 18,480 square foot building in the Pine River Industrial Park this year, they also have begun offering their furniture under a retail brand name, "Down to Earth Wood," selling by special order from their show room and through retail sites like the Lakes Area Crafters Market. They now offer finishes on their furniture as well.

Besides furniture they produce wood toys, tongue-and-groove wall paneling, wood flooring and custom moldings.

Brenda Wiener said Leverson made the complicated process of moving and expanding their business much easier.

Barb and Jeff Morrill moved their business from a home-based operation into a new production facility they built in Walker Industrial Park about a year ago.

Their business manufactures an electronic device about the size of a standard hearing aid that works in place of large earmuff-style ear protectors for people working around loud equipment. It also can connect with any two-way radio system to permit workers to talk to and hear each other clearly while wearing the devices and without shutting off noisy equipment.

Because the devices are small and fit in the ear, firefighters can use these devices to maintain communications with fellow firefighters while fully suited in all their gear, Morrill said. Pilots and engineers use them.

Since their move into the larger industrial park plant, Cavcom Inc. has expanded sales beyond North America to South America and Australia, Morrill said.

Anyone interested in becoming a Cass County Economic Development Corp. member or in obtaining business expansion or startup help can contact Leverson at (218) 947-7522 or e-mail at gail.leverson@co.cass.mn.us or stop at the office in the Cass County Land Department building on Highway 87 in Backus.

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