



Helping grow Cass County

Gail Levenson a natural fit as Economic Development Corp.
executive director

By [MONICA LUNDQUIST](#)

Cass County Correspondent

BACKUS - Starting and successfully running a business first takes goal-setting and careful planning, then determined management of time as well as money.

Gail Levenson, who became Cass County Economic Development Corp. full-time executive director in July, has lived her life that way, making her a natural fit for the position.

A native of Alexandria, Levenson went to technical school to gain certification as a cosmetologist and worked in that field for a few years. After she married Jerry Levenson, the couple moved to Wadena. She was primarily a homemaker as the couple added Sarah, now 23; Brian, now 21; and Adam, now 12, to their family.

When she was about 35, Levenson decided to go back to college. She enrolled in a Bemidji State University program that allowed her to take some classes on campus, some online and some by interactive television.

Levenson earned her bachelor of science degree in business and post-secondary education after four years of commuting from Wadena to Bemidji. She then taught computer classes for two years at Minnesota State Community and Technical College in Wadena before running that college's customized training and economic development department.

The second position gave her the opportunity to develop a lot of business relationships she said she still uses today.

Levenson left the college to become the Region Five regional economic development director for about three years. While in that job, she said she was frustrated by not having enough time to develop more from the potential she saw for economic growth in Cass County.

In 2003, she left Region Five and started her own economic development services consulting business, North Central Development Services LLC. Six months into her new business, Cass County Economic Development Corp. became one of her clients.

It took strict time management skills to allocate a set number of hours each week to each of her clients and to save time for her family. While doing that, she has helped 37 businesses start and expand within Cass County. Those

new and expanding businesses have infused \$48 million worth of new capital and about 350 new jobs into the county the last three years.

Leverson has not stopped her quest for continuing education. In 2004, she traveled to the East and West Coasts and Minneapolis to complete a National Development Council four-week course to become certified as an economic development finance professional.

It's not just a title. She said her college education gave her general background, but the certification course gave her specific technical information on how to put

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together business deals, how to structure financing and how to do cash flow analysis and projections.

She closed out her personal business this year after accepting the full-time CCEDC executive director position.

Leverson also said she believes professional affiliations are an important part of staying current in any field and for making new connections.

She has been an executive board member since 2004 of the Association of Minnesota Counties economic development affiliate, Minnesota Association of Professional County Economic Developers.

She is a member of Minnesota Business Finance Corp., a certified development company authorized by the Small Business Association to originate and service SBA 504 loans statewide. She is a member of Economic Development Association of Minnesota.

"Cass County is a great place to do business. I am excited to work for the EDC and the businesses in Cass County," Leverson said.

"The success of our organization is directly related to the talent, knowledge and dedication of Gail Leverson," CCEDC President Cy Struss said. "We are so pleased to provide full-time professional economic development services to our communities in Cass County."

Leverson said that Minnesota Small Business Development Center statistics indicate 65 percent of new businesses fail nationally, but 80 percent of those that receive Minnesota Small Business Development Center counseling before starting their business are still operating after five years in Minnesota. Cass County Economic Development is a satellite office of the Central Lakes College office of SBDC.

It has been a long haul over the last 15 years for Cass County's economic development program to reach this point. Many existing business professionals from throughout the county have spent long hours on the economic development effort throughout the years. Some original members

still serve on an advisory board to CCEDC.

It started in the early 1990s as a department of the county, then shifted to a nonprofit corporation in the mid-1990s to enable the organization to have the freedom to seek grants and other funding sources not available to a county agency.

The focus has shifted from primarily supporting the tourism industry to offering help to businesses of all kinds. Levenson said she hopes to be able to encourage more larger businesses and industries to locate here in the future to further expand the county's employment base.

Cass County provides \$35,000 to CCEDC each year. Cities, towns, businesses and individuals will contribute another \$45,000 toward operations this year with their memberships. Grants and fees for some services will pay the balance of about a \$140,000 budget this year.

Struss said CCEDC now is on sound enough footing that the annual planning retreat in February this year will set a four-year, not just one year plan for the future. In addition to the cities of Walker, Longville and Pine River offering a revolving loan fund to businesses in their communities, Struss said the CCEDC goal is to be able to offer a countywide revolving loan fund to businesses.

Anyone interested in becoming a member or in obtaining help with starting or expanding a business can contact Levenson at the CCEDC office in the Cass County Land Department Building in Backus weekdays from 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Mailing address: P.O. Box 142, Backus, MN, 56435. Phone: (218) 947-7522. E-mail: gail.levenson@co.cass.mn.us.

The CCEDC Web site can be accessed through Cass County's Web site at www.co.cass.mn.us. Click on Cass County Economic Development. To look over or print worksheets CCEDC uses to help people start a business plan and prepare a financing package, click on Business Essentials, then each of the Business Planning Resources topics.

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