



Cass official: Businesses want to expand

Posted: August 7, 2012 - 9:10pm

By [Monica Lundquist](#)
Associate Editor

WALKER — Gail Levenson, Cass County Economic Development Corporation (EDC) director, said she now is getting a lot of calls from healthy businesses wanting to expand.

Though the county's unemployment rate remains higher at 7.8 percent than what she feels is a more normal average of 6 percent, it is down from the 11 percent peak hit in 2009.

The June 2012 rate meant 1,181 people were looking for work of a 15,165 labor force.

Since 1990, Cass County's highest unemployment was 15 percent in January of 2009 and lowest in October of 1999 at 3.5 percent.

The EDC has tried to encourage more manufacturing, health care and renewable energy industries to locate in the county, she said.

Currently, 21.8 percent of the jobs in the county are in the trade and transportation sector, followed by 20.6 percent in leisure and hospitality, 17 percent in construction, 9 percent professional, 8.8 percent education and health care, 7.4 percent financial, 7.4 percent other services, 5.1 percent manufacturing and 2.5 percent natural resources and mining, she reported.

Average wages have increased here about 5 to 7 percent in the last five years, though construction industry wages have been unchanged, she said.

Five Cass businesses benefitted from the state JOBZ program, which will end in 2015. They include Hunt Utility Group with 28 jobs (17.64 full time equivalent), Next Innovations with 46 jobs (28.78FTE), Stille Havn Hus with 44 jobs (31.6 FTE), Trussworthy Components with 12 jobs (12.29 FTE) and CavCom with 11 jobs (10.9 FTE).

During the recession when financing has been harder to find for businesses wanting to start or expand, Levenson said she has tried to prepare people for an improved economic environment by offering a cooperative college education program with Central Lakes College at Pine River, by beginning a revolving loan fund, by obtaining a small cities building rehabilitation grant for businesses and homeowners and by working with the city of Walker to extend city sewer and water services for 21 more sites in that city's industrial park.

About 100 residents, mostly small business owners got free training in the last year to increase their efficiency in some of the computer training classes the EDC sponsored at Pine River, according to Levenson.

The EDC's primary focus remains to offer counseling and assistance to find funding for businesses seeking to start or expand in the county.

Levenson helps people write a business plan, estimate costs, analyze their collateral, project cash flows, understand business types, create an assumed name, select a business site, obtain permits, determine profit after first and second years in business, learn how to finance and secure financing.

All consultations are confidential and free. Levenson can be reached at (218) 947-7522 or by email at gail.levenson@co.cass.mn.us.

The EDC operates on a \$161,883 annual budget, with 12 percent of that coming from grants, 23 percent from Cass County, 37 percent from public contributions, 23 percent from fees for services and 5 percent from reserves.

Levenson worked with 22 businesses in June and July this year that have a potential to create and retain 190 jobs. Of those, seven are manufacturing, four are health care, seven are retail and service and four are in other fields.

Central Lakes College classes planned for fall at Pine River include blueprint reading and math applications.