

The last couple of weeks I have had three meetings with representatives of the Small Business Development Center at UW-Whitewater, the Southwest Wisconsin Workforce Development Board, and the Urban Hope Entrepreneur Hub. SBDC and SWWDB are collaborating to bring the Entrepreneur-Hub (E-Hub for short) program to Rock County.

The E-Hub program was developed out of funding by Reggie White and his wife Sara to empower entrepreneurs to develop self-sufficiency and a sense of giving back as a condition of the free enterprise system. The program has a proven track record in the Green Bay area, having helped launch over 500 businesses in the last ten years. Think about it: a new business started every week-and-a-half on average. And the program has subsequently expanded to help the Akron and Canton, Ohio region.

The national recession has impacted all regions, but the loss of manufacturing jobs has had a greater impact on Rock County than elsewhere. And now, SBDC and SWWDB are collaborating to bring the E-Hub program to Rock County. Obviously, this is particularly important to their organization goals of helping small businesses and of helping unemployed workers.

And, with our Economic Development Summit and the Economic Development Strategy that came out of it, Evansville has identified a Strong Entrepreneurial Climate as vital to the city's economic development and sustaining the business community. So the initial, "we'd like to meet to discuss this new opportunity," really got my attention.

E-Hub provides training in business practices, business ethics, and engagement in the business community. They regard it as entrepreneur training rather than small business training.

A focal point of the E-Hub training is their "Stepping Up to New Opportunities" curriculum. It is a six week course, one-half day each week with additional one-on-one counseling, covering 140 business topics. Topics include business basics such as business entities, accounting, and marketing. They also include broader concepts such as goal setting, public relations, and business evaluation.

E-Hub follows a structured curriculum and workbook and brings in successful business people from the community to discuss the topics with real-life examples rather than just an academic approach. The training is geared both to the entrepreneur with an idea for new business start-up and for the established business needing to re-boot, especially in tough times.

The business ethics and community engagement aspects of E-Hub come in part from the peer-to-peer networks that are encouraged and develop from the contacts among the E-Hub participants. Some of this engagement may come through formal and established means such as participating in the Chamber of Commerce or the Inventors & Entrepreneurs Club. Or it may be informal such as cross promotions, shared advertising, or other efforts for businesses to work together for mutual benefit.

In any case, E-Hub emphasizes that a business look beyond its individual storefront for success. There are benefits to cooperating with others in the business community. They may be a vendor or provide a service for your business, they may be a customer for your business, or they may become mentors or sounding boards for your business ideas.

To a certain extent, such engagement may be a truism that our existing businesses already recognize, but such cooperation and collaboration are not taught in your typical “Introduction to Business” training. E-Hub encourages and facilitates these valuable lessons.

They do not want to discourage or turn people away, but they also want to make sure that participants are actually ready for the program. So there is a bit of a vetting process. In January, prospective participants will meet with E-Hub representatives to make sure that the program is a good fit and that they are ready for it.

The actual Stepping Up to New Opportunities classes will be held first in February-March. They will hold two classes, one at the Forward Janesville office and one at Blackhawk Tech. One will be in the day and one in the evening, allowing some flexibility in case a participant has a scheduling conflict and needs to miss a class – hopefully they can attend the other session.

A second round of classes will be held in April-May. At this point, they have not committed to additional classes, but the thought is that it will become an ongoing program like in Green Bay and Canton. We have told them that we would like to host classes in Evansville, but at this point they are concentrating on the large population centers and have not committed to any future classes.

The cost of the classes is \$850, but funding through the SWWDB reduces the tuition to \$250. Additionally, scholarships may be available to further underwrite the program for individual participants. The scholarships are mainly intended for unemployed or underemployed workers, but really need to be considered on a case-by-case basis.

On Thursday, December 17, they will hold public information meetings for interested entrepreneurs and business people to learn about E-Hub. The meetings are at 8 am and 5 pm and will last about an hour. They will be held at the Rock County Job Center (rooms D/E), 1900 Center Avenue, in Janesville. RSVP to Eric Kuznacic at (608) 741-3502 would be appreciated.

I will attend the morning session since I think this looks like a good program that could benefit the Evansville business community. I hope a number of our entrepreneurs and small business will attend to learn more about if E-Hub would benefit them. If you'd like to carpool, please give me a call.