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Industry leaders' networking group helps workers

By Josh Nelson
jngallatin@bellsouth.net

The Gallatin Economic Development Agency is helping area industry leaders network with each other in an attempt to support both industries and their workers.

EDA Executive Director Clay Walker began the Existing Industries Board (EIB) in the fall of 2005, after he saw that there was no formal existing industry program. The Chamber of Commerce had an industry committee, but it had not met in nearly two years, and Walker felt something needed to be done.

"It took about two weeks on the job to figure out that we did not have a strong, working relationship with our existing industries," Walker said. "The EDA had worked with some select companies on specific projects, but we weren't involving the industrial community as a whole."

"Eighty percent of jobs created are created by existing businesses. However, most economic development organizations spend less than five percent of their time and money on existing industry," he said.

"Not by coincidence," Walker went on to say, "the communities and states that spend the most time working with their existing industries are the communities and states that enjoy higher job growth in terms of both existing and new business and industry. It made no sense not to have (an EIB) as a major focus of our economic development program."

The EIB has met four times since its formation, and there have been tangible results.



ABC Fuels, an international automotive parts supplier, hosted the last meeting, which took place Friday, March 8. Plant manager Marius Sipos told the group that the connections he has made through the EIB have saved him at least one major headache.

Sipos told the group that the plant had started a new program, but they were having interface problems between their previous equipment and their new equipment. "We needed a conveyor. Fortunately, I was able to get help from another person whom I met through this group, and we got the project done just before deadline," he said at the meeting.

Walker said Sipos' story epitomizes why he established the Existing Industry Board.

"The networking aspect of the program is perhaps the single-most important benefit to our major employers," he said. "This provides them with a format to meet each other ... and it provides the EDA with the opportunity to know exactly what is really on the minds of these important business and industry leaders."

Each time the group gets together, they meet at one of the members'

See *Industry* on A-9

Industry

Continued from A-1

buildings. They have some networking and mingling time, eat lunch, and then engage in more networking time before they begin the tour of the host business or industry.

During the lunch portion of the meeting, they have a program about a topic that is of interest to the group's members. "The plant managers set the agenda," Walker said.

At the latest meeting, Sumner County Emergency Management Director Ken Weidner updated the group on the latest developments regarding the Wolf Creek Dam and how a possible flood might affect the businesses and their employees.

Another program included employees of Sumner County Schools, area technology stories, and Volunteer State in a panel

discussion about education.

"Our program is about the industries, not about us," Walker said. "The managers and the HR directors took the ball and ran with it. If you look at any successful existing industry program, that is the common denominator—the industries, our clients, run the show."

Despite meeting just a few times, Walker says they've seen great rewards already.

"We've gotten to know our major employers so well, so quickly through the EIB. It would take years to get to know them this well individually with one-on-one meetings," he said. "By the time you did that, most of the leadership would have changed and it would do nothing in terms of allowing them to get to know each other, which is the real strength of the program."

"To hear of plant managers who didn't even know each other a year ago now calling one another and relying on each others'

experiences and expertise ... it re-energizes us at the EDA."

The members' actions show how much they're getting out of the organization. At the last meeting, Walker floated the idea of having an "industry appreciation event." The idea was nixed because the industry leaders felt the current format had a lot more value and meaning to them than an industry appreciation-type event.

Another telling fact about the EIB is the membership. Walker said they had 22 people in attendance at their first meeting, just over 30 people at their second meeting, and around 40 for their third meeting. The fourth meeting on March 8 had nearly 50 people signed up to attend.

The EIB can also have positive effects for the workers at the businesses and industries. Walker said that he knows of one company that is downsizing, while another industry is looking to hire. The downsizing industry can guide workers to the industry that is hiring according to each worker's skills. It makes the hiring process for the growing industry more efficient, and it makes for a quicker and smoother transition for the workers who have to change jobs.

"(The EIB) is something that doesn't grab a lot of attention or headlines, but it may be the most important thing an economic development organization can do for its community," Walker said.