

Participants review year of business coaching

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Twenty businesses and aspiring entrepreneurs were assisted through the City of Imperial's business coaching program in 2010. Two of those business owners reported at a meeting last Wednesday.

The business coaching program is offered through the city's economic development division. It is funded by both the city and a USDA Rural Business Enterprise grant through the end of this year.

Milan Wall of Heartland Center for Leadership Development commended the city for its efforts to help current and aspiring business owners.

The purpose of the business coaching program, he said, is to "seek out businesses with growth potential or transitional businesses," plus those persons wishing to start businesses.

The grant monies are being spent in the Atwood, Kan. area and this area, he noted.

Leslie Carlholm, Imperial's Community Development Coordinator, described how the program fits into Imperial's

overall economic strategy.

It addresses business retention and expansion, as well as entrepreneurial development, she said. The third economic strategy, business attraction, Carlholm said, is also somewhat affected.

"We have such a strong business community, and we want to be good partners with them when a business looks at us" for relocating, she said.

Carlholm said of the 20 businesses and aspiring entrepreneurs assisted over the past year, six are aspiring entrepreneurs, 12 are existing businesses and two are business transitions, or changing owners.

Two of the clients are hispanic and one is a youth.

Five businesses have been referred to business coach Janece Woofter of Imperial. Four have been referred to the Nebraska Business Development Center, and five have been referred to the Rural Enterprise Assistance Project.

Woofter is considered the top or "A" level, Wall said, for businesses poised to grow or expand.

She works one on one with

the business owner on a regular basis, with "complete confidentiality at every step of the way.

"The program is designed to provide assistance by guiding businesses to the appropriate resources," she said. Resources can be local, external organizations such as the Nebraska Business Development Center, Woofter's personal network, or by Internet.

Carlholm said she is still working with five clients to place them in the program.

Four businesses have been started or transitioned. Carlholm said, "Maybe this doesn't look like a lot, but from my side of the table it's really great."

Two new projects are in progress, with a 70 percent chance that they'll work, Carlholm said.

Unfortunately, two businesses have closed, she added.

The owners of businesses in the program who were present at the meeting commended the program and Woofter.

"I needed a lot of coaching," one owner said. "She (Woofter) gave me a great amount of ideas and direction."

Woofter told those present that if the program "can reach new businesses from the beginning, that would be nice.

"The overwhelming majority of businesses I work with would like help with bookkeeping and technology," such as web sites.

Carlholm added that feasibility studies and market research are also areas in which businesses ask for help.

The Community Development Coordinator has begun visiting existing businesses in Imperial to distribute surveys, asking "Are you thinking about growing?" and detailing what the program can do to support them.

In addition, the website www.imperialead.com is available for the public to pursue.

Lied Imperial Public Library Director Beth Falla told those present that the library offers many resources for entrepreneurs and small business owners.

New computers have been purchased through the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and federal monies, a faster broadband is expected soon, free computer classes are offered and the library has a large selection of leadership, business and career resources.

"I envision the library to become Imperial's business development center," Carlholm stated. "Small businesses can take advantage of it for a nominal fee," for scanning, faxing, a video screen and more.



Milan Wall, standing at right, discusses the business coaching program with Imperial community representatives, from left, Miles Colson, Doug Gaswick and Leslie Carlholm. (Imperial Republican photo)

