

AdvantageWest Economic Development Group **CERTIFIED ENTREPRENEURIAL COMMUNITY PROGRAM**

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Focus: The goal of the Certified Entrepreneurial Community Program is to create communities of entrepreneurial interest by promoting public and governmental awareness of the need for entrepreneurship through certifying governmental bodies and local units of government regarding their approach, strategy and state of readiness with respect to entrepreneurship.

Geographic Area Served: AdvantageWest serves 23 counties in western North Carolina. The counties served are: Alleghany, Ashe, Avery, Buncombe, Burke, Caldwell, Cherokee, Clay, Graham, Haywood, Henderson, Jackson, Macon, Madison, McDowell, Mitchell, Polk, Rutherford, Swain, Transylvania, Watauga, Wilkes, Yancey.

The North Carolina Office of State Budget and Management estimates that the population of Western North Carolina is approximately 1.2 million people, approximately 20% greater than the population in the region a decade ago. Much of this increase has been the result of migration from other parts of the country to the mountain region. North Carolina ranks third in the nation as a retirement destination, behind Florida and Arizona.

Western North Carolina's (WNC) regional economy is strong and growing. Asheville and other cities in the region have garnered recognition as best places for entrepreneurship and innovation (from the Small Business Administration), hot places for manufacturing expansions and relocations (Expansion Management magazine), best high-tech output growth (Forbes and Milken Institute) best places for business and careers (Forbes), and best places to live and work (from sources too numerous to mention).

Participant Age Level: Age is not really a key issue with the work of AdvantageWest at they work generally with organization leaders. AdvantageWest works closely with employers and workforce training providers — including four-year public and provide universities, community colleges, Workforce Investment Boards, K-12 school systems and private training organizations — to identify and meet employers' needs for skilled, productive employees.

Funding Sources: Funding is provided by six different Federal Agencies, State Agencies, Foundations, Educational Institutions, and more than 100 private sponsors that desire to assist and participate in the economic development of the 23 county region of western North Carolina.

Key Services Abstract: Through extensive research AdvantageWest has learned that regions who boast a healthy economy and high levels of prosperity are typically regions that also foster strong entrepreneurial environments. Much like the rest of the nation many counties in the WNC region has experienced significant job losses due to a number of plant closings. It is becoming more

apparent to local business leaders that in order to be competitive in today's global economy WNC must include entrepreneurship and small business as part of our economic development infrastructure and policy for the future of our country.

It is for this reason that in early 2007, AdvantageWest Economic Development Group took its entrepreneurial initiatives one step further down to the community level and created The Certified Entrepreneurial Community Program (CEC) to educate and empower local leaders with the critical foundational building blocks necessary to attract and retain entrepreneurs in their community.

The CEC Program consists of a five step process that is outlined in a guidebook that each approved leadership team is given at the onset of the certification process. Highlights of the program include the formation of a leadership team, community visioning, asset mapping, identification of entrepreneurial talent, comprehensive plan for including the youth in entrepreneurship, and streamlining the business licensing and permitting for entrepreneurs. The Certified Entrepreneurial Community Program and the contents of the guidebook are copyrighted materials and the business method is currently patent pending.

Upon successful completion of all required elements of the program, AdvantageWest is providing marketing for these communities as well as access to a revolving loan fund for qualified entrepreneurs, funding for last-mile telecom broadband, training for leadership teams and signage for communities.

Summary of Key Benefits and Results: Blue Ridge Economic Council supports entrepreneurs through the following four focus areas: education, mentoring and networking, communications and capital formation. BREC meets monthly, and provides quarterly opportunities for qualified entrepreneurial businesses to present plans before a group of local investors, the Blue Ridge Angel Investors Network.

In 2008 Haywood County became the first Certified Entrepreneurial Community (CEC) in America using the CEC guidelines and process. They had developed the first Small business incubator in NC back in 1985. Haywood Community College was the first CC in the country to implement a REAL program – Rural Entrepreneurship through Action Learning –which has been providing hands-on entrepreneurial education for the skilled craftsperson in the region. Haywood County is now poised to assist aspiring and current entrepreneurs to succeed in their county.

Fourteen different communities in the AdvantageWest region are currently seeking the CEC designation. People in eight different states have worked with AdvantageWest about doing CEC in their states. The former director of AdvantageWest Dale Carroll has testified before Congress twice about the merits of the CEC program and the advantages it has allowed the counties in western NC. He shared that AdvantageWest is the first EDC in the US to develop a professional Economic Developer Certificate program with a university. (Appalachian State University)

The five Workforce Development Boards across the AdvantageWest region have entered into compacts with AdvantageWest. Over 30 partners have joined with AdvantageWest to complete an allied Healthcare worker study for the region. AdvantageWest is the first regional EDC in the US to develop a Center for Health and Aging with legislative leaders and university partners. (University of NC at Asheville) Asheville Buncombe Technical College and Buncombe County have joined with

AdvantageWest to launch the first Wet-Lab in Western North Carolina. They are also exploring an inland port in the region with university partner Western Carolina University.

Several metrics are used to measure economic performance of the 23 county region served by AdvantageWest. Many of them use the year 2000 as a baseline. The WNC Economic Index produced by the Walker College of Business at Appalachian State University indicates a climb of 18 points from 100 in the year 2000 to 118.2 in August 2008. The Working Capital Index produced by Business North Carolina Magazine indicated that a 3% gain in the number of jobs within the AdvantageWest region has been achieved from 2000 until August 2008. The NC Commerce Department Capital and Investment tracking indicated that the largest number of new jobs in more than two years occurred in the third quarter of 2008 with 2,122 new jobs being announced as a result of capital investments.

Lessons Learned: Focusing on the needs of the region has been very helpful in causing interest in the Certified Entrepreneurial Community program. The work with Advanced manufacturing professionals, Blue Ridge Food Ventures, the WNC Film Commission, the Blue Ridge Entrepreneurial Council have all brought to the surface the needs of the many entrepreneurs in this region of North Carolina.

Because of the number of home based and small businesses in the region the EDC learned of the importance of the Internet to businesses in the region and has worked to get the 177 mile fiber network “Carolina Connect” in place to allow connection to the marketplaces of the world.

A regional initiative that focuses on critical needs of a region can add value to a concept such as the Certified Entrepreneurial Communities and enhance the resources of individual communities.