

HOMETOWN COMPETITIVENESS



A Unique Approach to Rural Community Enhancement

HomeTown Competitiveness, a Nebraska initiative currently working in seven counties and communities in Nebraska, has been chosen as one of six recipients of grants provided through the W. K. Kellogg Foundation's 75th Anniversary Entrepreneurship Development Systems for Rural America.

The \$2 million award, over three years, was approved by the Kellogg Foundation Board of Directors meeting at Battle Creek, MI. More than 180 applications were received for the grants to develop six national models in rural entrepreneurship.

HomeTown Competitiveness (HTC) provides a framework for rural communities to help them identify reachable goals and strategies focused on

the four pillars of reversing rural decline, including building leadership and community capacity, engaging young people, fostering local philanthropy and supporting entrepreneurship.

Cynthia Milligan, Dean of the College of Business Administration at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, is a member of the Kellogg Foundation board and will become chair of the board in December. Milligan said, "The objective of this initial investment by the Kellogg Foundation is to demonstrate the promise of entrepreneurial development in revitalizing Rural America and to stimulate additional investments by local philanthropists and state, local and federal governments."

The Kellogg EDS grants will allow

recipients to promote entrepreneurial activity in their region, produce entrepreneurial models for other communities, leverage significant investment, and stimulate national and state interest in rural entrepreneurship policies and strategies.

The core partners in the Kellogg-funded initiative will be the Nebraska Community Foundation, The Heartland Center for Leadership Development, the RUPRI Center for Rural Entrepreneurship and the Center for Rural Affairs. Other collaborative partners are colleges and programs at the University of Nebraska; the Nebraska Microenterprise Partnership Fund; Northeast Community College at Norfolk; Northern Great Plains, Inc. of Fargo, ND; the Nebraska Lied Main Street Program and the Rural Enterprise Assistance Project; and Consolidated Telephone Company and Great Plains Communications, Inc., who serve the rural HTC communities.

Pilot project in Valley County

HTC began as a pilot project in Valley County and Ord in 2002. Other sites for HTC are Stuart and Atkinson; Mullen; Chase and Perkins Counties; Knox County; David City; and O'Neill. The grant will allow the initiative to expand to as many as 15 sites in Nebraska, including Ho-Chunk Community Development Corporation on the Winnebago Indian reservation and other tribal entities.

HTC received the 2004 Innovative Program Award from the Community Development Society, whose members come from 32 countries and the United States. HTC has also been featured in a number of recent news stories, including USA Today and an editorial in the Omaha World-Herald.

One of the strengths of the HTC initiative has been the financial commitment made by the participating communities, according to Bob Stowell, an Ord attorney and a member of the Nebraska Community Foundation Board of Directors. The Kellogg grant will give communities access to more comprehensive resources, but still require local community match and substantial volunteer commitment.

Young entrepreneurs learn art of business in Ord

Brisk sales, profits, and overwhelming success are just some of the words that describe Valley County Economic Development's Youth Entrepreneurship Business Fair held at St. Mary's Elementary School in Ord on April 15. Thirty businesses reported over \$4,000 in sales with nearly 1000 items sold. Ten of the young entrepreneurs sold out and were taking custom orders.

Instructors Angie Cargill, Gretchen Olberding and Nancy Glaubke stated the overwhelming community support helped make this event a huge success.

Local business volunteer Sharon Michalski helps entrepreneur student Molly Welniak set up for the Business Fair.



O'Neill/Holt County youth survey

In O'Neill, 25 young adults have been working with HTC to find out what local youth are planning to do after high school and how their community can help more of them stay or return to the area. Working with HTC leaders in Stuart and Atkinson, and schools within the county, a youth survey was conducted in April.

The results show what the young adults already knew, but they may surprise anyone who thinks the future of rural communities in Nebraska is not full of promise. In O'Neill, of the 289 Junior and Senior

Community Foundation.

O'Neill leaders are now beginning their work with young people who have expressed interest in returning to connect them with entrepreneurial and career opportunities. They are using the survey results to begin the dialog with local leaders and young people about offering more recreational and leadership opportunities. Similar HTC work is underway with youth in Stuart and Atkinson.



Student entrepreneur Joe Michalski explains to customer Norma Swanek the benefits of his golf abacus. Joe's "Abacus" was a hot item at the Ord Business Fair for young entrepreneurs held April 15.

High School students surveyed, more than 98 percent plan to attend college, but over 55 percent want to return to north central Nebraska. Among O'Neill public high schools students, 63 percent want to own their own business.

The results from the smaller communities in Holt County were even greater in several categories. In Stuart, population 650, 66 percent of high school students want to return to the area. In Atkinson, population 1,380, an equal number of students wish to come back. The primary reasons given for wanting to return are family ties and quality of life.

"It is increasingly possible for young adults to live and work wherever they wish, because of the availability of information technology throughout Nebraska. Because distance is shrinking, you can live and work wherever you wish," said Maxine Moul, President Emeritus of the Nebraska