

Rural Entrepreneurship-- Summary of Northeast Listening Sessions

Presented by Mary Peabody* for The Northeast Regional Center for Rural Development at the Nashville Listening Session Summit, Dec. 18-19, 2005

GOALS OF LISTENING SESSIONS:

- To find out what is working in terms of helping rural entrepreneurs become more productive, and how to make it work even better
- Provide opportunities for participants to learn from one another and expand networks
- Learn about promising practices, determine how to define and measure “success”
- Develop an agenda for action locally, state-wide and regionally, and nationally

LOCATIONS

A total of five sessions were held between June 2005 and September 2005 covered the Northeast region.

- Maine, New Hampshire and Vermont were combined in a session held at Concord, NH
- New York session held in Syracuse, NY
- Pennsylvania session held in State College, PA
- West Virginia session held in Charleston, WV
- Maryland session held in Annapolis, MD

ATTENDANCE

There were between 20 and 30 individuals at each site from a broad variety of organizations. Participants included lenders, technical assistance providers, economic developers, business owners, educators, researchers and community development specialists.

FORMAT

The sessions shared the same participatory format with a few minor modifications. Participants were asked to reflect on what is currently working in their region/state; what would a future vision include; and what would be potential roles at local/state levels and federal levels; and what role could NERCRD play in attaining the vision.

KEY POINTS OF THE DISCUSSIONS

Summary of “What is currently working?” discussions:

- We have outstanding market potential in the northeast
- In many places, entrepreneurship is acknowledged as a viable economic development strategy
- There is a lot of education, technical assistance, and funding opportunities available
- Programs have become more responsive to the needs of entrepreneurs
- Many passionate, committed leaders championing the entrepreneurship cause
- Some powerful success stories
- Growing emphasis of ‘buy local’ programs

- Increasing awareness of the creative economy and its impact on economic development
- Diversity of entrepreneur-types – small business, microbusiness, agriculture as well as lifestyle, growth, survival, and serial entrepreneurs

Summary of “What would the future vision include?” discussions:

- Communication and coordination between/among programs strengthened
- A ‘culture of entrepreneurship’ is promoted in local/state/federal policies
- Entrepreneurship is integrated into the education system (K-12 and post-secondary)
- Entrepreneurs are champions and advocates for themselves
- Funding streams for technical assistance and loan programs are longer term, more flexible and come with fewer strings attached
- Common benchmarks are identified to help programs measure success across different scales of business programs
- Outcome indicators that address quality of life and community benefit are developed
- Small-scale agriculture is included in rural entrepreneurship policy and discussion
- Regional (multi-state) collaboration is easier and barriers are dismantled
- Duplication of services is reduced
- Competition for scarce resources is reduced
- Insurance and regulations are affordable and available to all entrepreneurs
- Reliable data tells the story of how entrepreneurs benefit rural communities
- Programs are sensitive to needs of limited resource audiences, culturally sensitive
- Programs services are available for non-English speakers
- Creativity is encouraged
- Mentors and peer-advisors are plentiful
- Rural areas are seen as valued natural resources, separate from urban areas with unique needs

Summary of “What would be potential roles at local/state levels and federal levels?” discussions:

Local/State

- Revise regulations that place unfair burdens on entrepreneurs
- Encourage collaboration among providers
- Fund local initiatives
- Keep entrepreneurship visible in economic development initiatives
- Buy local campaigns – encourage consumers to support local businesses
- Infrastructure – cell towers, incubators, etc.
- Include entrepreneurship as a career opportunity in schools

Federal

- Affordable healthcare for small business owners
- Ensure that business insurance is available and affordable
- Tax incentives for starting businesses

- Lending programs that allow for higher risk startups
- Encourage entrepreneurship curricula in K-12 standards

Summary of “What role could NERCRD and the land grant system play in attaining the vision?” discussions:

- Help create a research agenda that will provide a true picture of entrepreneurship
- Act as a clearinghouse for all the information available
- Host conferences, training opportunities that get all the ‘players’ together
- Provide training in use of technology
- Offer a portal to existing programs
- Help technical assistance providers evaluate their programs
- Conduct research on consumer behavior, market trends, new products
- Build multi-state collaborations and partnerships

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