

AERN News

Alabama Entrepreneurial Research Network, "Connecting Entrepreneurs to Resources"

Perry County on the Move

by John L. Martin
Executive Director
Perry County Chamber of Commerce

Perry County a key to economic development in West Alabama? This is no pipe dream if plans now under way at Vaiden Field, with the help of AERN's resources, come to fruition.

Here's the interesting story about Perry County's good fortune. Three years ago at our Annual Chamber of Commerce Meeting, Alabama Development Office Director Neal Wade said the state was looking for a 10,000-foot airstrip.

Just so happens Perry County Airport and Industrial Authority owns such a 10,000-foot airstrip, the first of that length ever built in the state. Once used to train Air Force pilots to land T-33s, the first operational jet fighter dating back to the 1940s, the land came to the ownership and control of the City of Marion and the Airport Authority in 1976.

After the Air Force quit using the airport and it was transferred to the Airport and Industrial Authority, the city had difficulty maintaining the entire 10,000-foot runway and 475 acres of land. It had kept up 6,755 feet of the runway.

On learning the value of such a facility for economic development, Preston



The Perry County airstrip was used by the Air Force to train pilots to land T-33s (pictured here) until 1976 when the land was turned over to the City of Marion.

Sanders, chairman of the Authority, caught the vision of what a modern updated airport could do not only for poor Perry County but the entire Black Belt.

Sanders worked with Authority board members Joe Berry, Robert Turner, Carrie McFadden, Don Miller, and the board's attorney Kirtly Brown to partner with the Chamber, which used AERN resources to develop a renovation plan for Vaiden Field. The objective was to complete the vision of developing Vaiden Field into a facility that could become a regional airport for the area.

Inquiries began as to how and who could help complete the vision and support the Chamber of Commerce logo, "Perry County on the Move." As these inquiries materialized, Michael Helmsing surfaced. His company, Volkert & Associates,

was considered at the top for airport design and layout. With permission of the Authority board, the Chamber invited him to visit Vaiden Field for an initial evaluation of how to implement the vision.

After a site inspection, Helmsing said he saw more possibilities for a rural community than any other site he was aware of. He asked what the Authority had been doing to acquire rural airport maintenance funds provided by the state and the FAA annually.

This was news to the Authority. Helmsing said he would prepare an Airport Improvement Plan that would qualify Vaiden Field for these funds. With these funds, a consultant could be hired to do a complete study and layout that would provide a plan of improvements to bring Vaiden Field to a condition that would be the drawing card for economic growth.

The five-year plan included clearing the property of flight obstructions; redoing the entire light system—electrical vault, runway lighting, beacon, wind cone; two inches of overlay paving for the 6,755 feet of runway, taxiway, and parking area; 10 "T" hangers; self-fueling for aviation 100 and jet fuel A; security fencing; and improved roadway into the airfield.

Wright Painting Service Says AERN Was Right for Him

Bernard Wright's business is one of many that show how beneficial AERN is to rural Alabamians starting a new business. Wright, a resident of Fayette, had an idea of opening a painting business, but it was not until AERN hosted a workshop that Wright decided to put his thoughts in action.

AERN provided him with books of information and research about opening a small business and taught Wright how to complete some of his own research. After reading the information and conducting the research, in particular learning how to write a business plan, Wright decided to go forward with the idea of owning a painting business.

"AERN is really good for an entrepreneur," Wright said. "It provides valuable information and it's how I got started."

Anne Hamner, executive director of the Fayette County Chamber of Commerce, echoed Wright's remarks, saying, "Wright's case is a good example of how promotion works. We advertised our meeting in the newspaper and he visited and saw resources that could help him get into business. He

continued his follow-ups both here and at the University and by advertising locally."

Paavo Hanninen, co-director of the AERN and director of the University of Alabama's Small Business Development Center, says, "Mr. Wright was referred from our AERN Fayette Center and we were able to help him get his thinking and his procedures in order to be able to start and operate a successful small business."

Taking the skills he learned through trips to the Chamber's AERN office, Wright began to market his new business by making fliers, posters, and business cards. He placed them around town, advertised on radio, and began networking by sending out e-mails with written proposals for his business.

Wright started his new business from home so he would not have to invest money immediately in commercial work space. Currently he is working by himself, but he anticipates eventually being able to hire three to four people.

At first Wright began by painting houses, which gave the business a



Mr. Bernard White, whose painting business idea was brought to fruition thanks to the AERN workshop he attended.

great start. But as the housing market began to slow, Wright shifted more to the commercial market.

When asked if he thought he would have been as successful without AERN, Wright said, "I would advise anyone who wants to start a business to contact the AERN."

Wright's business is called Wright Painting Service and he can be contacted at 205-242-5733 or wrightpaintingservice@yahoo.com.

Hannah Seay
AERN Intern

How Healthcare Resources and Entrepreneurial Activities Relate to Each Other in Rural Areas

by Vishwas Gadhvi
AERN Research Assistant

(Editor's Note: Vishwas "Wish" Gadhvi is a native of Ahmedabad, Gujarat, India. He holds a medical degree from India, studied preventive and social medicine, worked for rural communities in Gujarat, and at a primary health center and community health center as an intern doctor. He has an M.A. in health promotion from the University of North Alabama and is a doctoral student in exercise science at The University of Alabama.)

Over the next two months, I will visit AERN partners to investigate how healthcare resources and entrepreneurial activities relate to each other in rural areas. For the past month I have been gathering information and talking with campus experts about these factors and now I want to learn what our AERN partners and others in the communities know and think about these factors.

I will be traveling with Dr. Ed Mullins, who is supervising my study, and Mr.

Paavo Hanninen, AERN's co-director. The project is a collaborative effort of AERN in UA's College of Commerce and Business Administration and the Center for Community-Based Partnership, which leads UA's engagement scholarship efforts.

I will interview and/or get written questionnaires to individuals that our AERN partners identify as the best informed about medical care and business in our target towns. The questionnaires will be directed to

leaders in retail, manufacturing, media, construction, banking, insurance, transportation, real estate, agriculture and the like, as well as community volunteers, church members, politicians.

The research we will conduct is often referred to as “exploratory,” meaning we will use both qualitative and quantitative techniques to find answers to our questions about the relationship between healthy economies and healthcare delivery. In this case, the research is focused on AERN partner counties. We will focus on what people believe they need in the way of economic health and physical health.

Rural Alabama, like rural areas throughout the world compared with urban areas, has a shortage not only of primary care physicians but also of other health-related institutions, including hospitals, clinics, nursing homes, drug stores, and so on. Is there a niche for entrepreneurs here?

From a statistical standpoint, Alabama is an intermediate-sized state in both land area and population. Covering 50,744 square miles, it ranks 30th in land area. With a 2007 estimate of 4,627,851 people, it is 23rd in population.

Because 1.3 million Alabamians live in rural areas, Alabama has a strong interest in maintaining healthy and productive rural communities. The way “urbaness” and “ruralness” are defined has changed over the years by



AERN research assistant, Viswas Gadhvi.

different federal agencies, and these definitions are not always easy to grasp. In general, two-thirds of Alabama’s counties are rural, making it one of the most rural states.

Alabamians love their rural country. Even though most Alabamians live in cities, most of Alabama’s territory is in the country. Most urban Alabamians have relatives in the countryside and trace family histories to farm, pasture, and forests. They value the beauty, tradition, values, and heritage of their rural past, even after they have relocated to the big city.

“We need to create opportunities right here for our fellow people,” said one of my rural health program colleagues at the University of Alabama. There is a tremendous need to improve health care services to rural Alabamians, especially those in underserved populations. In 2007, 12 percent of Alabama residents had no health insurance.

Average per capita income for Alabama residents in 2006 was \$30,894; rural income lagged by about \$4,000. Estimates from 2005 indicate a poverty rate of 20 percent in rural Alabama,

compared to 16 percent in urban areas. Education is a strong indicator of a region’s health and income. In 2000, 31 percent of rural Alabamians had not completed high school compared to 22 percent in urban areas. Unemployment rates for rural Alabama are higher than for urban areas.

According to the Alabama Department of Public Health, rural counties in Alabama are facing many health care challenges. These include difficulty accessing healthcare services, lack of hospitals and emergency medical services, and the increasing perception of local people that urban hospitals offer higher quality services. Other perceived rural deficits include an inadequate number of health care professionals (physicians, nurse practitioners, physician assistants, mental health professionals), the high median age of current rural medical doctors, a population with low educational attainment, lack of economic opportunities and stability, lack of population growth due to migration to urban areas, a higher proportion of older people in rural areas, transportation problems, and low per capita income.

We are very much aware that, despite having to overcome some challenges, rural Alabama offers many good health services. Our purpose for this study will be to find ways and ideas for local businesses and entrepreneurs in rural Alabama to support and be part of increasing the good health care available in our beautiful, beloved rural areas.

AERN Partners Meet in Tuscaloosa

About 25 AERN partners met on The University of Alabama campus August 19 for a workshop on preparing news for local media and for publication and distribution. They also received new business reference books, were briefed on how to use AERN’s enhanced

website, and shared information from the field.

“We got a lot of important business done,” said Annette Watters, co-director of AERN, “from distributing new reference books to explaining our

new brochure and website. We also received excellent news about many interesting events and developments in the partners’ home counties.”

Ed Mullins conducted the session on news and publicity. This session was



Dr. Ed Mullins and Annette Watters distribute informational materials to Felicia Pettis, Sandy Smith, Ann Alford, Candace Johnson, and Lauri Cothran at the AERN Partner meeting held at The University of Alabama, August 19, 2008.

when they ask, 'What's up?' they'll start writing up their news and features, getting photos to go along with them, and sending them to us and local media."

To give AERN partners more tools in their

conducted in the form of a "budget" meeting, a term used by news organizations to brainstorm upcoming events and information for in-depth and feature articles. Photos and other illustrations for these stories also were discussed.

Each partner was asked to develop two story ideas, then do the reporting and write up one of them to send them in to Mullins. All the partners were able to come up with two story ideas, but only two followed up by sending in completed stories.

"While we did not get as many stories written by the partners as we had hoped," Mullins said, "we did get enough leads on good stories to keep my students busy for several months. I was impressed with the news savvy of our partners. They understand what makes news and the importance of telling our story of entrepreneurial activity to the public in a variety of forms."

"We'll keep working on getting our partners to produce more copy," Mullins said. "Once they see that it's very similar to answering a friend

toolboxes, Karen Chapman and Paul Brothers displayed many of the new features of AERN's website. These include new graphics, more emphasis on news, easier ways to find news articles, a vertical navigation bar for quick location of the most popular content, an updated reference section, an interactive calendar, and more.

"They have added lots of new content, but the business librarians also made sure all the most popular features of the old website are still there. They have just made everything easier to find and use," Watters said.

Paavo Hanninen and Watters announced very good news about funding for the AERN. The University of Alabama continues to support the program with time, expertise, and money. And the program has recently been awarded two external grants to continue its activities and add more deserving counties to this successful program.

The meeting ended with drawing for door prizes, which is always everybody's favorite way to end a good meeting.

Alabama Entrepreneurial Research Network

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