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Alabama Entrepreneurial Research Network, "Connecting Entrepreneurs to Resources"

Washington County AERN Grand Opening

AERN welcomed Washington County as a new partner to AERN in February. Chatom, the Washington County seat, holds the library, courthouse, the chamber of commerce, and multiple banks. The new AERN center is located in the library.

"The library seemed like a good place to have it because there's already traffic there, and it's a community center for our area. We were happy to partner with them and have it at the library," said Jessica Ross of the Washington County Public Library.

Brooke Atchison, the executive director of the Washington County Chamber of Commerce, had been working with Annette Watters and Paavo Hanninen, AERN co-directors, for a year prior to the grand opening. "The library was the perfect place for it," Atchison said. "We've had three new businesses and a restaurant open, and they've all been directed to the center."

In addition to Ross and Atchison, the grand opening was attended by UA's AERN team; Elaine Beech, Alabama House of Representatives, District 65; Charles Singleton, Probate Judge, Washington County; Brent McMahan, Senior Area Manager of SBA; Harold Crouch, Chatom Mayor; and several local business owners and entrepreneurs.

"Several of the business owners and entrepreneurs stayed after the opening to explore business plans," Ross said. "We have a lot of businesses that don't have a business plan. Some owners have expressed that they would like to formalize some of the things that they're already

doing by putting it on paper and making it formally a part of their bylaws."

Through the AERN, the library has use of an additional computer, printer, and new books. The library is working hard alongside the chamber of commerce to promote all of the AERN resources that are available to the public. Staff members have been trained, and a general public training session has been scheduled to promote and inform the local population of what the center can offer.

"Since it is so new we're still trying to figure out how we're going to promote it to the public," Ross said. "Once we have our general public training and have some broader publicity for it, I think the resources will be utilized a lot more."

"We've had some people come by who were changing jobs because they had been notified that their position had been cut, or they're looking for a better opportunity," Ross said. "So they're coming in to research jobs and pay scales and new careers they're interested in. The center has good databases for that."

The library has received a grant through the Ala-Tom Resource Conservation and Development Council that provides funding for part-time staffing to help people with their resumes and to research potential jobs. The resume templates were uploaded to the new AERN computer so



Ribbon cutting ceremony for a new AERN center located in the Washington County Public Library at the grand opening on February 17, 2011.

(Left to right): Elaine Beech, Alabama House of Representatives, District 65; Jessica Ross, Washington County Public Library; Brooke Atchison, Executive Director, Washington County Chamber of Commerce; Annette Watters, Co-director of AERN; Mary Patterson, Outreach Coordinator, AERN; Charles Singleton, Probate Judge, Washington County; Paavo Hanninen, Co-director of AERN; Brent E. McMahan, Senior Area Manager of SBA. (Photo by Andrea Mabry)

people could consider potential business plans while they look for a job.

"Lots of times people who have lost their jobs are considering starting their own business, so that's been a neat partnership," Ross said. "We hope to be able to continue to promote the center and send out more information as time goes on."

All AERN partners statewide wish our new Washington County colleagues success with this new and exciting partnership.

Daniel Hollander and Andrea Mabry
AERN Graduate Student Journalists

2011 AERN Annual Partners' Meeting in Demopolis

The 2011 AERN Annual Partners' meeting began with the Pledge of Allegiance on Flag Day, June 14th in the Demopolis Higher Education Center. Jenn Tate, executive director of the Demopolis Area Chamber of Commerce, welcomed the partners to the meeting and gave a briefing of economic and business developments in Demopolis.

Tate said she was excited to have the AERN annual meeting in Demopolis. She went on to highlight the free concert events in Demopolis, the crawfish boil, and riverboat tours and dinners as some of the events that make Demopolis an attractive place to visit and stay. While Tate loves to visit other areas in Alabama, she stressed every city's most important job: "enticing people to come to your town and get them to stay."

Annette Watters, AERN co-director, expanded on this idea with her presentation, *Characteristics of Prosperous Rural Counties in the United States*. She compared the rural counties in AERN to the rest of the country and looked at what factors contribute to a successful economic landscape.

The presentation opened with factors that are not predictors of prosperity for rural counties. Surprisingly, these include such things as proximity to an airport, interstate access, the presence of a large manufacturing industry, a major government employer, and specific climates or terrains. Watters emphasized that those are unchangeable factors, and unchangeable factors are not what brings prosperity to a rural area.

Other things are predictors of prosperity for rural counties. They are a strong private sector economy, diverse kinds of businesses, educated adults, a stable population, established social networks and supportive institutions, and a homogeneous population that shares culture and values.



Jenn Tate, executive director of the Demopolis Area Chamber of Commerce speaking.



Guest speaker, Tye Warren, discussed the lending environment in rural Alabama. (Photos by Andrea Mabry)

"Economic diversity is what brings prosperity," Watters said, "Local capitalism distributed among many industry groups yields better results than a heavy dependence on government employment, or any one industry type."

She also discussed how prosperity blossoms through education, including local school systems and universities and colleges. "Well educated people can make the decisions that entice the business world to come to rural areas. A good education begins early. High-performing local schools are a huge predictor of prosperity," Watters said.

Mary Patterson, AERN Outreach Coordinator, summarized the results of a recently completed formal program evaluation of AERN. The evaluation study demonstrates that AERN is highly regarded by its local partners and is carrying out the University of Alabama's mission to improve the quality of life in Alabama.

Paavo Hanninen, AERN co-director, introduced Dr. Mike Hardin, who was recently named dean of the Culverhouse

College of Commerce and Business Administration at the University of Alabama. He praised Dean Hardin's support of AERN.

Hanninen also led a round-table discussion of AERN resources. Participants talked about how to get the word out about AERN as they enjoyed a catered lunch from Smokin' Jack's Barbeque, sponsored by Mayor Mike Grayson of Demopolis and the Chamber of Commerce. Smokin' Jack's, a local restaurant in Demopolis that was featured in the *2010 AERN Annual Report*, is a long-term success story and is owned and operated by Jacky Poole.

Sandy Smith, the executive director of the Monroeville/Monroe County Chamber of Commerce, gave examples of ways that she has used AERN's feature "Ask a Business Librarian" to get answers for her constituents. "For example," Smith said, "my constituents were able to use UA resources to find out how many businesses are importing or exporting for the whole state. A key feature of AERN is to tap into UA for information and resources." Business librarian Paul Brothers elaborated on the information available through the Bruno Business Library at the AERN centers.

Guest speaker Tye Warren, an experienced entrepreneur, discussed the lending environment in rural Alabama and options available to business owners in a soft economy.

In celebration of the 10th anniversary of AERN, commemorative tiles were presented to AERN partners to recognize the powerful role they play in the sustainability and success of AERN. "The partners of AERN are of paramount importance to not only the success of our program, but obviously to all of your communities as well," Hanninen said. "Your work is critical and integral to the partnership that knits AERN, the University, and all our counties together."

Daniel Hollander and Andrea Mabry
AERN Graduate Student Journalists

The April 27th Series of Tornadoes Affected AERN Communities

Communities throughout Alabama have felt the impact and aftermath of the storms that swept across the state on April 27th. While Tuscaloosa may have received the most press during and after the tornadoes, including a visit from president Barack Obama, counties all across Alabama were affected, including many of those within the AERN network.

Geiger, a small town of 250 people in Sumter County, was absolutely devastated. Every family's home was destroyed or suffered significant physical damage. FEMA visited the town for a month because the damages there were so severe. While some residents didn't have homeowners insurance, several contracting and engineering companies from around the state did what they could to help rebuild.

Allison Tucker, the executive director of the Sumter City Chamber, said, "People from Tuscaloosa, New Orleans, and Demopolis came to help. The Church of Christ was able to send monetary and non-monetary donations to Geiger. Everyone, in their own way, did something to help."

A Mennonite community in Geiger did their own rebuilding. "Their homes were damaged and they started rebuilding immediately," Tucker said. "Two days later it seemed that you could believe nothing ever happened."

Livingston and the rest of Sumter County were not physically affected by a tornado. "Local contractors probably saw a little increase in business, as well as the hardware store, but other businesses were not really affected," Tucker said. "Lots of people here have helped Tuscaloosa and made donations to United Way and the Red Cross, and numerous people have called the Church of Christ to ask about giving donations."

In Tallapoosa County, in and around Alexander City, a tornado destroyed 50 homes and was responsible for several deaths. The demolished homes were primarily on the sloughs of Lake Martin.

In addition to the homes that were demolished, many others sustained damage.

"An initial problem has been where to put all the debris. Local landfills were not able to handle so much incoming waste so quickly," said Joanne Ninesling, an Alexander City Chamber of Commerce staff member.

Children's Harbor, a summer camp on Lake Martin for children with chronic illnesses, sustained significant damage, but they have been able to recover and welcome some campers this summer. Alexander City's business district was largely spared by the storms.

"The Corps of Engineers is taking responsibility for cleaning up Lake Martin itself, but individual owners are responsible for clearing their own property," Ninesling said.

Paavo Hanninen, AERN co-director, was in his house with his family when it received significant tornado damage, but his family was luckily unharmed. Hanninen's home was close to the Rosedale apartment complex, an area of Tuscaloosa that was one of the hardest hit by the tornadoes and where many homes were completely destroyed.

"I've talked to a lot of people who closed their businesses that day without knowing that a tornado was about to hit. They sent their employees home at 1:30 or 2:00 and probably saved a lot of lives," Hanninen said.



The Forest Lake neighborhood of Tuscaloosa, Alabama was completely demolished by one of the April 27th tornadoes that ravaged the state.



Tornado damage near Tuscaloosa's 15th Street area is an example of the devastation many areas suffered throughout the state of Alabama. (Photos by Jennifer Lantrip, Birmingham, Alabama)

Matt Arnold, president of the Marshall County Economic Development Council, who attended the AERN Annual Partners' meeting as an observer from Marshall County and potential future AERN member, relayed a similar store-closing story in his county.

Ferguson Enterprises, a sprinkler manufacturer in Guntersville that employs about 40 people, sent everyone home after they realized power wasn't going to come back after the first wave of storms. The building was subsequently leveled after a tornado

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passed through. "There would have been deaths if there had been anyone in that building, wiped away, but they had no power so they sent everyone home. It's a remarkable story," Arnold said.

Other businesses in Guntersville and the rest of Marshall County suffered damage, but the biggest effect was the loss of power. Many businesses couldn't operate for up to two weeks after the storms, but Marshall County is now back on track.

"Our contractors are back to work now that the insurance money is finally starting to roll in. Initial impacts are rough, but I think in the long term we will move right along," Arnold said. "The biggest impact was people who couldn't work after the storm. Some still can't go back to work, but most people are."

Over two months after the tornados swept through Alabama on April 27th, we are still feeling the effects and many individuals, families, and communities continue to rebuild the places they call home. Our hearts and prayers at AERN go out to all those affected by the storm.

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This publication is partially funded by the U.S. Small Business Administration.

AERNews is a quarterly publication of the Alabama Entrepreneurial Research Network, The University of Alabama. Articles reflect the opinions of the authors, but not necessarily those of the staff of AERN, the faculty, or the administrative officials of The University of Alabama.

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