The Alabama Entrepreneurial Research Network now has two new partners, Butler and Marion counties.

Francine Wasden, executive director of Greenville Area Chamber of Commerce in Butler County, said she is excited about the new partnership with the AERN. The partnership has been needed, she said. “It seems every day we have somebody with a question about opening a business of some sort,” she said. “This will help them find the answers to those questions they have.”

Wasden said she contacted the AERN after reading about how downtown Marion in Perry County had benefitted from the resources provided by the AERN, after five long-vacant buildings had been turned around into five retail businesses. Wasden said parts of downtown Greenville need a similar change, and she hopes the AERN can do for Greenville what it did for Marion.

 “[The article] talked about what AERN had done for these people [in Marion] and these new businesses were started, so I decided I would just contact AERN,” Wasden said. “We’re small, too, and we’ve got a lot of empty buildings downtown. We’re hoping to get people to come and look into opening businesses downtown.”

The contract with AERN and Butler County was signed in June. Wasden said. By August AERN was providing the resources needed and educating chamber of commerce staff on the software, how to utilize the resources, and how to help people interested in starting a small business.

“It’s going to be a good partnership,” Wasden said. “I think it’s going to be a little time before people realize the benefits, but they’ll learn exactly what they need to know about starting a business. When people become aware we have the capability in the chamber office with helping them gain knowledge about starting a new business, they will take full advantage of it.”

When Phil Segraves, mayor of Guin, attended an Alabama Entrepreneurial Research Network seminar in Fayette a few years ago, he left wondering how to bring the program to his county, according to Annette Watters, Associate Director of the Alabama Entrepreneurship Institute. Mr. Segraves had seen potential for Marion County through the AERN and was incredibly enthusiastic about the project. So as soon as grant money became available. “Segraves was the first person we contacted,” said Mrs. Watters.

Now, after an informational session held on August 24, the AERN center located in the Collins Life Center is ready to be opened in Guin. Marion County officials and AERN directors have great expectations for the new center because of the leadership and character of the county.

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of the resources available in the new center. These include access to business guidebooks and computer software. Current business owners will be able to use the center’s resources for all sorts of undertakings, including developing better marketing plans, said Mayor Segraves. He added that potential entrepreneurs will be able to research how a certain type of business will be received in Marion County.

A business owner in another Marion County town owns a 10-minute oil change garage for automobiles, but wants to expand his services to 18-wheelers. “So I was telling him that there’s a source that can tell him how many 18-wheelers there are in the county,” said Mr. Segraves about the resources available at the AERN center.

Mayor Segraves brought officials from Guin and other Marion County towns to learn about the resources available before the ribbon cutting ceremony for the new AERN center. “I see all kinds of opportunities [with the AERN],” said Mr. Segraves. “We can grow the county through local people who know what’s good for the county and what we need.” He added that the AERN will be a valuable resource for adding products to existing businesses and giving them new ideas.

Mayor Segraves invited officials from other Marion County cities, educators, bankers, state representatives, librarians and city clerks to the information session that was held in August, according to Ms. Wood. She thinks each of the attendees saw how the AERN center could fit into their world, benefitting each in slightly different ways. “He didn’t want other people to hear about it secondhand and wonder why the center was in Guin,” said Ms. Wood. “Segraves wants everyone to know that this center is in Guin for the good of the county, not merely for Guin,” continued Ms. Wood.

Though the major towns in Marion County are widely interspersed within its bounds, Guin is centrally located, making it a logical and convenient location for the new AERN center. “Since the Marion AERN center is not at a chamber of commerce where most other AERNs are located,” Ms. Wood noted, “we’ve got to work hard to get the word out and get people over there. That’s the challenge.”

The new center will be a rousing success if Wayne “Rebel” Silas, mayor of Winfield, has his way. Mr. Silas said that the AERN center is one of the best things that has been brought to Marion County. “Lots of people start with an idea but have no chance to research,” he said. Opening a business is a learning experience, but that process can be expedited if the right materials are utilized, continued Mr. Silas, who owns a restaurant with his wife. “If somebody comes by and says, ‘I’m going to start a business,’” said Mayor Silas, “I’m going to send them to Guin.”

Marion County is the northernmost county in the AERN network. The program began in the Black Belt and has since been highly successful, spurring rural counties across the state to show interest in using AERN resources. The AERN represents 15 of 67 counties and 23 percent of the territory in the state of Alabama.
been dealing with adults who wanted to start a business, but never really went after the youth,” Grice said. She said she wants the youth in Tuskegee to know that, when they think about starting a business, there are resources available in places other than the library.

Grice became executive director in November, 2008. To familiarize herself with AERN and what it does, she had to go through training, something every new director must do. “I had to learn the different aspects of AERN, what the community has, and what AERN has to offer to the community,” she said.

Though she trained for several days, Grice said the learning never really stops. Every day on the job lets her learn more about the job, she said. “It’s all new to me,” she said. “Working with the community is not, but working in this capacity is.”

Grice said she’s seen the software AERN provides make a difference in the community. To request a loan, entrepreneurs are required to present a business plan to the Community Development Foundation before the foundation considers giving out a loan. Software that lets entrepreneurs put together a business plan is available at the AERN center as BusinessPlanPro.

Virginia Loftis, executive director of the Choctaw County Chamber of Commerce, said she’s seen many prospective business owners benefit from business planning software, too. “We have a great program on the AERN computer to help [entrepreneurs] develop [a business plan], plus we have the Business Plan Handbooks,” she said. “The Community Sourcebook of Zip Code Demographics is a must. How are you to properly determine if your business will be viable in this area without determining the target demographic for your product and if that group is present where your business is?”

Loftis said two very important books in planning a business are Your Credit Score by Liz Pulliam Weston and Credit Repair by Robin Leonard. “These two books go hand in hand,” Loftis said. “So many prospective business owners really do not realize how their credit score can affect their chances of obtaining financing.”

Since Loftis took over as executive director in August 2008, she said she has seen Choctaw County growing. “There are many possibilities here in our county and with the right resources, the right motivation, and a positive attitude, we can achieve success and make this county what it is meant to be. I don’t think the county fully realizes that AERN is here and what we have to offer them. We need to build upon that.”

Tracey Mitchell has been the director of the Bibb County Chamber of Commerce since February, 2009. She also said The Community Sourcebook of Zip Code Demographics is a vital tool in starting and maintaining a business. Even older businesses can use the zip code information to analyze their market, she said. “Right now our AERN users have been people who already have an established business and are trying to find ways to keep afloat,” she said. “They are trying to utilize those tools to find strength in the economy the way it is.”

Mitchell said that although the AERN Center in Bibb County has mostly catered to existing businesses, she is working towards making the community more aware of the center and what it can offer them. “I would like to encourage people to make use of the information that we have and the books that we have and open a new business and give new life here in Bibb County,” she said. “My goal is to get awareness out there and show the community what we have to offer.”

Since Sheryl Smedley took over as director at the Selma-Dallas County Chamber of Commerce in July, she said the emphasis has been on the need for more retail in Selma. She said she hopes AERN will serve as a tool for entrepreneurs to get those businesses started.

Smedley wants to get the word out that the door of the Chamber is always open. “I think it’s a very helpful tool to have right now—especially during these economic times where businesses are starting to take a second look. Small businesses right now are looking at ways to expand their businesses. As they look to expand, Smedley said the center can guide them in those decisions regarding that expansion.”
Small Business Handbook Available Online and at Centers

The Small Business Handbook, developed by the Small Business Development Center at The University of Alabama, is reproduced at http://aern.cba.ua.edu/handbook/index.html. Here’s a resource you can jump right into from home. If you are a prospective business owner, take 45 minutes to go through it. It was assembled by one of the AERN co-directors, Paavo Hanninen, and those who know Paavo know he likes plain language.

This handbook is both comprehensive and clear. It demystifies many small business concepts and practices. For example, many people want to run and hide when they hear words like “planning,” “marketing,” and “research.” They think those things are only for government officials and academics.

Actually, they are for anyone who will dig into this clear guide to conducting local market research, writing a business plan, getting out a news release, balancing the ledger, and more. Here are just a few examples of what you will find in Small Business Handbook:

• Market research. It’s not something you can do before lunch, but it is something that anyone can do. Simply put, market research helps you uncover who will buy your product or service, what price the buyer will pay, and how to reach the buyer.

• Business plan. With help from AERN’s resources at the centers and from Hanninen, dozens of Alabamians have launched successful businesses over the past eight years, and they all managed to produce the dreaded business plan. So can you. Make sure you set aside enough time to do it thoroughly and accurately, and seek help where needed.

• Accounting. With a little help, terms like “income statement” (also known as profit and loss statement) will become as familiar as “checking account balance.”

Reference books and newsletters on display at the Collins Life Center in Guin.

Photo by Andrea Mabry