

2005 Original Marketing Grant Award through the Department of Economic Development

\$350,000 to flow into the region
for economic development

Michael Blouin, director, Iowa Department of Economic Development was on site in at the Atlantic Community Center to announce the awards.

In January of 2005, the Iowa Department of Economic Development (IDED) released a request for funding proposals for Business Accelerators and Cooperative Regional Marketing. A proposal for each program was submitted in an attempt to secure the financial resources for rural southwest Iowa. On March 31st, Gary Sandholm, SWICO president welcomed Director Blouin in Atlantic. Blouin announced IDED's intent to fund both proposals at the site central to the members of the group of partners seeking funding streams to build components of the comprehensive Southwest Iowa Entrepreneurial Center.

Each funding package is funneled to the organizations acting as fiscal agents over three years for \$175 each. The \$300,000 commitment by the state represents the largest award to any one region of Iowa. The Southwest Iowa Coalition will serve as the fiscal agent for the marketing award and the Grow Iowa Foundation will serve as fiscal agent for the accelerator award.

Even before the official announcement for proposals for the accelerator was released into the public domain, SWICO was aware that IDED was designing the program. Conversations about how southwest Iowa could access the funding to continue building components of a Southwest Iowa Entrepreneurial Center took place. Three accelerators were funded prior to the release of the RFP and a fourth was soon under consideration before a proposal could be crafted and submitted on behalf of rural, southwest Iowa. Only six funding packages were targeted to be awarded.

The definition assigned to an accelerator made meeting the stated criteria difficult for a rural, region currently lacking services already in existence in other, more populated areas of the state. The time-frame for submission was also a challenge for entities with plans and projects in the first stage of implementation but that had not already moved into a formal organizational structure. Funding from the Community Vitality Center and the Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture was being used to develop product to market tools for businesses indigenous to our area, but the funding to hire targeted staff for the Center who could provide on-site, requested technical assistance had not been secured.

The comprehensive plan for the Center requires at least \$625,000 in wages and associated payroll expenses for its first two years of operation. The list of identified staff are diverse and necessary to provide technical assistance and education demanded and unavailable to communities. Just a sampling of the staffing includes, two business development specialists, an attorney, a loan officer, a web master, an accountant, administrative assistants and more.

The state funding, along with the required cash match of \$22,000 from the region will put in place one business development specialist who will focus on business plan development. The specialist will also serve as a single point of contact to clients and communities in order to ease navigation for access to outside existing providers of assistance and programming. Services provided will need to be fee-based in order to sustain this component of the Southwest Iowa Entrepreneurial Center. Additional funding streams are being targeted to put other Center staff in place.

The marketing RFP was designed for rural areas of the state, but the time-frame for submission was, once again, a challenge unless some structure and history of pre-existing initiatives existed. Members within the Coalition who had already partnered with a sub-set of counties within the larger membership logically chose

to submit an application under the umbrella of their existing initiative or previous partnership. However, eleven of the counties represented within the Coalition membership had no historical, viable, multi-county partnership with whom to make application. Members requested that SWICO submit an application to secure the resource so that a multi-county marketing initiative could be explored and implemented.

Collaborative marketing efforts can include integration of available properties and spaces on the statewide buildings and sites Web site, conducting a regional laborshed study, and direct marketing efforts. These efforts can include the creation of new regional collateral materials, increased regional presence at trade shows and Sell Iowa trips, as well as targeted direct mail appeals to corporate decision makers.

The regional marketing effort only enhances the accelerator activities, and they both continue build toward a fully-functional, area-appropriate, sustainable community development tool. The Center will eventually be able to adequately and effectively serve regional and community-specific initiatives and business starts with a commitment and focus to what it will know and understands best - rural, southwest Iowa.

Additionally, in both Carroll and in Council Bluffs, Blouin announced on the 29th the funding of two other collaborative marketing efforts, one between the state and Western Iowa Advantage and another with the West Central Marketing Plan. The collaborative marketing efforts will bring \$462,000 of state dollars in the next three years into southwest Iowa to market the area in anticipation of expanding economic opportunities into the 20 county area.