

Minnetonka pleased with success of Open to Business program

BY Marc Ingber - Sun Newspapers

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When Bethany Buchanan was looking to open a second location of her business, she wasn't sure how to proceed.

She's the owner of Grace Homes in Minnetonka, a six-bed residential care home for the elderly. In opening a second location, Buchanan and her husband wanted help in both finding a home, logistics and financing.

Earlier this year she happened to see an ad for the city of Minnetonka's Open to Business program and decided to check it out.

Thanks to the program, she was able to accomplish her goals with the help of its primary staff member, Rob Smolund, enterprise facilitator for the Metropolitan Consortium of Community Developers.

Buchanan and her husband have been meeting regularly with Smolund for four months. He has helped them find a second location in Hopkins and is also helping them secure a small business administration loan.

"He is very helpful," Buchanan said. "I was very happy. There is not really any help for new small business owners like ourselves."

That is one of the reasons Minnetonka decided to partner with the Metropolitan Consortium on the Open to Business program. The only other cities in the metro that offer it are St. Louis Park, Brooklyn Park and North St. Paul.

"We were talking about the lack of resources for small businesses in the community," said Julie Wischnack, Minnetonka community development director.

"It's hard to entrust all your business information to a city government. We thought it was a good idea."

Through the first quarter of 2011, 26 businesses have been assisted through the Open to Business program. The clients are split evenly between existing and start-up businesses.

They have received assistance on topics such as business feasibility, financial planning, loan packaging, marketing, revenue-stream analysis, employment regulations and more.

"Some are start-up ideas," Wischnack said. "Some are operating and are making a business move and want some assistance."

Smolund said he was impressed with the number of business owners who had taken advantage of the services.

"The initial response was much better than we expected," he said. "I have found it to be rare that cities offer intensive one-on-one counseling to prospective and existing entrepreneurs."

The program's services are provided free to the clients. The city contracts with the Metropolitan Consortium to provide the services. Wischnack said Minnetonka benefited from the program as well.

"As a city, seeing vacancies isn't a good thing," she said. "You don't want businesses to fail. It's a good opportunity for people."

"It is the city's program," Smolund said. "We are just providing the service for much less than it would cost the city to hire an extra employee."

The program is adding a new component beginning in May called "Test Drive Your Idea." One day per month, Metropolitan Consortium staff will be at the Minnetonka Community Center and will be available for a 15-minute walk-in consultation.

"This connection creates a follow-up contact for the business," Wischnack said. "It's a long-term connection."

Buchanan said she had recommended the program to other business owners in Minnetonka and felt its presence in the city would continue to grow. She and her husband plan to continue utilizing its services as their business progresses.

"He really thinks outside the box," she said of Smolund. "He's really intelligent. In these tough times, you appreciate an ally."

Smolund said it's been a joy to work with the city and its business owners. "The staff understands the importance of supporting small businesses in the community by providing technical assistance and financing resources to existing and start-up businesses."

Wischnack said she hoped more people would discover the program. "Don't be too shy to call," she said. "You never know what opportunities are out there."

For more information on Minnetonka's Open to Business program call Rob Smolund at 612-789-7337 ext. 11 or visit eminnetonka.com. The Minnetonka Community Center is located at 14600 Minnetonka Blvd.