

Columbia Economic Team *continued from front page*

of small business funding assistance. A Small Business website (smallbizhub.columbiacountyoregon.com) was immediately created to provide a clearinghouse for small business resources, health information, and financial assistance opportunities.

In addition, CET partnered with the State of Oregon, Columbia-Pacific Economic Development District (Col-Pac), and Columbia County to establish and manage four rounds of grant funding to small businesses and non-profit organizations. In total, more than \$1.6 million was directed by CET to over 337 businesses throughout every community in Columbia County. They were also able to directly connect more than two dozen businesses to additional selective state and programmatic funding.

To provide business education, CET collaborated with Wauna Credit Union to execute an eight-week small business workshop series covering everything from basic business planning to insurance, legal, all aspects of marketing, and business regulatory strategy, and provided scholarships for tuition reimbursement for business owners that enrolled in PCC business classes.

Throughout the pandemic CET partnered with the Columbia County Board of Commissioners to fund and create a PPE “pop-up store” at the county fairgrounds, providing buying power and supply chain help to small businesses and non-profits, distributing masks and other essential personal protective equipment.

Business Recruitment and Expansion

This fiscal year, CET staff prepared 23 project RFP proposals solicited by Business Oregon and Greater Portland Inc. These proposals range from pitch letters to full Excel workbooks and unique multi-page applications, each providing an excellent opportunity to work with stakeholders, landowners, brokers, utilities, city government, and regional workforce and economic development partners.

CET worked with four prospective industrial developers; two projects are still active and viable, with cumulative job count of approximately 350. They approached six, and are still working with two companies (manufacturing and metal fabrication with estimated cumulative job count exceeding 80) considering relocation to Columbia County. They are currently

working with three companies with existing operations in Columbia County to facilitate significant expansion of operations and new product line development.

Tourism

CET serves as the destination management organization for Columbia County, representing the area in strategy, policy, planning, and funding matters.

With all tourism and travel marketing shut down by Executive Order during COVID, CET focused instead on infrastructure and destination development, obtaining and deploying \$115,000 to fund projects that support our county’s Outdoor Recreation strategy. Outdoor Recreation in Columbia County is experiencing record surges in visitors and economic activity; oddly, we have COVID cabin-fever to thank and capitalize upon.

CET committed \$25,000 in partnership with Columbia County to complete all interpretive signage along the Crown Z Trail, where visitor and usage counts have skyrocketed as one of the closest developed trail systems to the Portland urban population center.

CET also sought grant funding for multiple development projects and successfully obtained two Oregon Tourism Grants for more than \$90,000 for Destination Development and Community Recovery and Improvement. One project will place four fully equipped BikeHub Stations in Clatskanie, Rainier, and Vernonia, and create both expert and new family-friendly bike routes on

popular GPS applications, reinforcing the County’s burgeoning trails and cycling attractions.

The second project will create building-size murals, pocket gardens, lighting and planting equipment, and other safety and aesthetic improvements to beautify downtown Vernonia, which is a gateway to our trails system and a substantial share of the visitor camping and outdoor recreation in the County. Both projects will be completed by fall 2021.

Plans In Action

A Strategic Plan is under development forecasting out two-to-five years. The top three short-term goals are to develop a Small Business Resource Center, Support Business & Economic Post-pandemic Recovery, and expand “BRRE” – Business Retention, Recruitment & Expansion. Longer-term goals include enhanced development of Tourism, CET Membership Growth, and Outreach, Marketing, and Advocacy.

Work is already underway on some of these goals. For example, significant progress has been made in establishing the Small Business Resource Center (SBRC), Columbia County’s first. CET developed a plan for an SBRC in early 2021, enlightened by small business experiences during the pandemic that demonstrated high need and demand for business advising, training, and ongoing education. Seeded with a grant obtained through Col-Pac, CET has now secured a commitment for continuous base funding for an SBRC and inclusion in a statewide network, and

a federal earmark to provide 25% additional support. CET is now securing complete funding for the four-year start-up phase and hope to announce the establishment of the locally operated and staffed SBRC in the third quarter of this year.

CET Executive Director Paul Vogel recently made a presentation to the Vernonia City Council seeking support for the SBRC, noting that Columbia County has approximately 1,500 small businesses throughout all communities and unincorporated areas of the County, with a strong composition of women-owned, solopreneurs, retail, restaurant, sewing sector, small manufacturers, and home-based businesses.

While there are limited existing local/on-the-ground resources to meaningfully assist individual business owners or to provide consistent group, sector, or business-topical training, the need for advisory, individual attention, referral and networking to other resources and training, exists.

The proposed Small Business Resource Center (SBRC) will serve Columbia County small businesses at all stages of development: thinking, launching, growing, reinventing, exiting, and export/import. Immediate emphasis will be online consulting, but in-person consulting will also be a priority. The SBRC will be staffed full-time, creating opportunities for marketing, outreach, business development, relationship building, and collaborative workshops and training.



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