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New program helps one business connect with another

Kansas City Business Journal - by [Sonya Hubbard](#) Contributing Writer

Businesses in Eastern Jackson County now have a one-stop shop to help them find business development services.

The Eastern Jackson County Development Alliance recently launched OneConnect EJC, a platform for sharing business resources and information.

"We're kind of like Wal-Mart," said Jim Devine, CEO of the Lee's Summit Economic Development Council. "We greet people into our pipeline and help them find resources or aisles full of goods in the process."

That assistance comes from more than 40 academic, commercial and civic partners in the metro area. It can include job training, help in obtaining financing or assistance in finding qualified architects or engineers.

Through OneConnect EJC, businesses can send a call for services to all of the partner organizations in the network or target the request to certain categories of partners, said Brien Starnar, president of the **Blue Springs Economic Development Corp.**

Partners include the Full Employment Council, Metropolitan Community Colleges, the Missouri Division of Workforce Development, area banks, small business development consultants and others.

OneConnect EJC was launched after staff from the Blue Springs, Independence and Lee's Summit economic development organizations attended Blane Canada Ltd.'s annual Synchronist Users' Forum in Chicago in October 2008. Jodi Krantz, director of business development for the Independence Council for Economic Development, said OneConnect EJC is loosely based on a program in Ohio.

But she and her counterparts — Sher Lopez, business director for the Blue Springs Economic Development Corp., and Teresa Evans, vice president for the Lee's Summit Economic Development Council — designed a unique program to serve businesses in Eastern Jackson County.

Krantz, Lopez and Evans manage the OneConnect EJC program in their respective communities. Economic development officials in Grandview and Grain Valley also have joined.

OneConnect EJC requests often are a result of site visits, during which economic development officials survey existing businesses, Lopez said. Information is incorporated in the organizations' existing Synchronist Business Information System databases. Synchronist is an online software program that helps users track development trends and manage business recruitment and retention efforts.

OneConnect EJC seeks to help businesses in a fast and efficient manner, Starnar said. Previously, he said he and Lopez typically made several phone calls to identify resources that could help a local business. The process was labor-intensive and might take weeks to get answers.

The new program allows requests for help to be submitted electronically to a larger network.

"This really expedites the process," Starnar said, adding that responses often arrive in 24 to 36 hours. The parameters of the program call for responses within 72 hours.

To maintain confidentiality, Devine said requests for information generally are submitted without disclosing a business's identity.

"We made the decision that rather than trying to learn everybody's portfolio and product mix, we invite them to send us their qualifications or proposals," Devine said. "The effect is that it allows people equitable access so that there's no sense that we're playing favorites. But more importantly, it allows the most current material, programs and state-of-the-art knowledge to be delivered to people who need it, one on one, not through us."

A OneConnect EJC Web site (www.oneconnectejc.com) is being developed by the Eastern Jackson County Development Alliance. In addition to explaining the program and listing program partners, the site eventually will enable companies to complete online forms to request assistance.

Tom Lesnak, president of the Independence Council for Economic Development, said OneConnect EJC's cooperative approach increases the likelihood that the companies, jobs and taxes they provide will remain in the area.

MEDIA



“Our attitude is, if we keep a company in the region, the program has been successful,” he said.

MAKING CONNECTIONS

During the past 90 days, the Blue Springs Economic Development Corp. processed 10 requests through OneConnect EJC.

Of the resources requested:

- One was for business needs (patent assistance, marketing assistance, business plan assistance, product development, target market research).
- Three were for work force needs (custom training, work force development programs, special demographic needs).
- Six were for assistance with financing.

Successes:

- One company hired five employees.
- Two companies began work force development programs.
- Among the requests for financing, six responses were provided within eight hours, and four appointments were set within 72 hours.

Source: Sher Lopez, business outreach manager, Blue Springs Economic Development Corp.

ONE CONNECTION

Who: Aspen Contracting Inc., a company that specializes in replacing storm-damaged roofs, gutters and siding on homes. Dustin Doll, vice president of sales, learned about OneConnect EJC through a contact at Metropolitan Community Colleges.

Location: Lee's Summit

Company's history: Aspen Contracting started in 2006. The company has grown quickly in the past three years, with sales increasing from more than \$5 million in 2006 to a projected \$70 million by the end of this year.

Why OneConnect EJC: Aspen Contracting already has an in-house call center that handles customer service matters. But it has been trying to decide whether to build an in-house outbound telemarketing center, or whether it would be better and more cost effective to outsource that work.

“This is a unique and comfortable way to get other business professionals' opinions – it really creates a nice little network,” Doll said. “It's very simple, and it doesn't cost anything.”

First steps: Doll met recently with Teresa Evans, vice president of the Lee's Summit Economic Development Council.

“She was very proactive,” Doll said. “She told me: ‘Don't worry about how large or small the question is. Whatever it is, I can send it out to our partners, and anyone who wants to respond to it will.’”

Response: Doll was impressed by how quickly he got a response from a OneConnect EJC business partner.

“Within 24 hours, Teresa forwarded a reply to me from a company that specializes in helping companies build telemarketing programs,” he said.

Since that first contact, Doll has received an official proposal, talked with the partner company and scheduled a meeting.

Thoughts about OneConnect EJC: “This is a well-organized way to share information within the business community,” Doll said. “And I like it that the requests are anonymous since you may not be ready for people to know what your business is doing.”

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