ENERGIZING ENTREPRENEURIAL COMMUNITIES
A Pathway to Prosperity

Ellie Dudding interview with Melody Borchers

Melody: We came into the process late, so we were about 6 months behind some of the other communities. I was familiar with some BR&E [business retention and expansion] projects with the state and the way Dan explained it, it struck me as a very local level retention and expansion project. I really liked that—it was a new area for SPICE, we felt it fit with our mission. We've never really ignored local businesses on purpose but our focus has always been startups and we were really reactive not proactive.

We've always been really good at getting people up and running. We've never reached out to the local community, so the focus on getting to know your local business, talking to them, surveying them was a new approach. We actually had a lot of our surveys done under our BEE A CEO program, we had our students do the surveys. We liked that, we put that [the surveys] on the website if someone wants to continue that. We felt there was value in that and the collective information we were learning. While we don't have a lot of businesses in town, what we've done here has driven our goals for the whole last year and the year moving forward.

Ellie: In what way? How have they been moving forward?

Melody: We heard a lot about communication problems— broadband, internet, cell towers. We knew it was a problem, but we started participating in area meetings where they were discussing those topics. That's something we could not solve on our own and Fritizie, our board president, wrote letters why it was important for our customer base. That was one thing that we heard about; we knew the problem but we had never done anything.

If you asked anyone about businesses in the area, they'd say there weren't any—or they'd pick out two. The idea of not only starting companies that stay around but making sure the ones that are here stay around was new. That became obvious through our surveys and other businesses contacting us needing space for our business, etc. There was a real lack of awareness of who our existing businesses are and lack of awareness on our behalf of what we can do to help them. That has been a huge focus for us over the last year. The ongoing thing we heard was "nobody knows we're here" and that drove some of our initial ideas of what we want to do—to create
awareness of and create support for our local businesses.

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The items that we are rolling out at the event later this month are the app, it has a real tourism and travel focus. Any business in the area that has any lodging, food, shopping, etc. will be on the app. It's part of the Hocking Hills app, which already has a huge base of customers, which means it will have a huge audience and potential users of those services. There's a whole Perry County section on the app, it kicks off this month and it provides a great tracking mechanism. We can find out how many people visited Perry County—how many people visited Little Italy's [a pizza shop in New Straitsville], how many ordered food. We'll have some impact numbers that will be terrific.

[In regards to] the website, I really think she [the developer] has done a great job. It includes a lot of things that are not on the app because the app is very much tourism. The website includes information on the organizations in the area and who to contact in the Village [of New Straitsville]. None of the little villages in Southern Perry have a website, and while we don't have one for each town, the website will have information for all the little villages. We'd like to keep adding to that.

Ellie: Would you say that the reason all these businesses don't have websites is because of the connectivity issues?

Melody: Yes—I would say it's because of the connectivity issues. A lot of them have Facebook. That's kind of their default mechanism because so many people use Facebook. You have to drive traffic to your website. Facebook, by default, people can find you. Everyone is personally on it, so you can find people personally and drive them to their village Facebook page. So, that is the tool most of them have used.

We started an initiative with rack cards for each town and Elizabeth [SPICE employee] is going to turn that into a brochure, so we'll just put them all in one. We bought a flat screen TV and we're going to have that up in the window with ongoing information about SPICE, other things going on, the businesses, and that will run continuously even when we're not open. We went to several events where we took information about our businesses and actual products, not just handouts. We did those to promote and help support our community. Based on all of that information, we're in the process of regrouping what to continue with, what to try differently. We did a small business training for folks in the area.

The new piece that we see as part of the continuation of Ecommunities—we're trying to reach out to the whole community not just the businesses to create more visibility for SPICE and the programs and services we offer. Sort of a social enterprise focus—make money, improve the community, and have a positive environmental impact. We have one project in mind already and we're going to be looking for funding.

Ellie: Oh great, what project is that?

Melody: It's called "Creek Geek Enterprises" [Creek Geek Enterprises refers to a business SPICE would like to start that would use a cooperative business model to employ formerly incarcerated Southern Perry County residents. The business would make fishing lures and employees could buy into the business to become part owners in the business.]

Ellie: Yes- I remember Fritzie telling me about that.

Melody: So we've put in an application for an Americorps Vista position and wrote the job description around working at Creek Geek. We're trying to identify partners that we'll work with on that. Everything with ECommunities is within our mission anyway, but it certainly gave SPICE a new focus, an improved connection with our business community. We're really glad we participated.

Ellie: While the program is in this transitory period, we're going to be reaching out to new communities and building networks in new places. Do you have suggestions or advice on things we could do differently? Is there anything you would've liked to have known before you got started?

Melody: I think the thing that we probably needed more help with, if I had known before, was more local involvement from the beginning. I had an initial group, a kind of task force, and some were more involved than others. I tried to get business owners on it but we never got anybody from the Village [council] on it. There are other organizations in the community—the whole time we were working in our group another group was trying to get this health clinic started. That group was meeting and trying to identify partners, funding, all of that kind of stuff. I don't believe that ever moved forward. There was some crossover but they were doing their thing and we were doing our thing. We did send information to the gentleman who runs the county website, we did send info to the Chamber, and I did present at the Village Council but I don't think enough businesses and local citizens were involved.

The other ECommunities groups were helpful but we sure were a diverse group too. We're nothing like the Logan Chamber—in terms of size, and scope, or anything. The closest [in size] is Shawnee and I don't think we should have been two, it should have been one community combined [Shawnee and New Straitsville], to just be Southern Perry. Corning has been really involved with us, even more than Shawnee [Corning is another local village in Southern Perry County, not part of the ECommunities network] because Shawnee was doing their own thing.

Ellie: Do you think it would be beneficial to have more emphasis in partner communities? Where we could have set you up with Amesville in a way?

Melody: I think a community mentor thing would have been great. As it turns out, we stole a lot of their [Amesville] stuff anyway. The Logan Chamber folks are so great but so different, the things they were going to do and the way they were going to do it, it's not really within our bailiwick. I don't think there were enough little villages, the back to back with bigger places, it wasn't as helpful. I tried to talk to Bev and Deb [of the Shawnee Ecommunity] to see what they were doing but we never talked together outside of the regional meet-ups.

Ellie: If this program continues in New Straitsville, how would you like to see the program evolve?

Melody: We would love help with Creek Geek. Help us identify partners. We'd like to start by getting the right groups and organizations involved. In fact, we met some folks who would be the types of folks we would like to

employ there. Re-entry jobs, who from social services needs to be involved? What support services are out there? We just need a planning group right from the get-go.

Ellie: Who are some of the other partners you're talking to?

Melody: The village [of New Straitsville], the Poverty Think Tank of Perry County, Rural Action's Watershed Management Team, Jobs and Family Services, I do have a whole list of folks.

Ellie: We are going to start doing work in Chauncey and some other communities; do you have any advice for getting started in a new community now that you've gone through this experience?

Melody: [In regards to the approach] I would be very simplistic, offer a simple step by step guide. Not a whole lot of verbiage just: "here's what I can help with." Who are the key partners and who do they think should be involved? Once you get there, be clear about what are the next steps, maybe a best practice kind of a thing.

Ellie: I just have one more question. Is there an instance or story that sticks out with your experience with Ecommunities? One that felt powerful or memorable?

Melody: I found the Regional Meetings very helpful. For me, that's where I found "Leave It Travel" and I decided to do this app. I don't think on my own I would have ever come up with that idea. To me, where people came together and shared ideas is where we found a lot of ideas of what we wanted to do. I don't know if it was an 'ah-ha' moment or anything but that was very helpful.

Ellie: Are there anything other thoughts you'd like to share?

Melody: Having an organization like Rural Action, which I name drop right and left, lent us a lot of credibility. The fact that we had a partner—like Dan would send us examples of things even outside of Ohio. The curriculum with Airbnb, that became a very popular workshop for us. We offered it twice and it was well attended. The credibility of the Rural Action name was very helpful rather than us just beating the pavement on our own.

Ellie: Thank you so much for sharing your time Melody and answering our questions.