

Success Story - Economic Development – Buy Local Initiative

Kewaunee County is a rural county with three small population centers. Each has less than 4,000 in population and a small downtown shopping district. In Luxemburg, shops primarily serve local residents. Algoma and Kewaunee, both located on the shores of Lake Michigan, have an influx of summer tourists that supplement local spending. Residents and businesses have tremendous pride in their hometowns, which has contributed to insular behaviors especially in terms of shopping habits . . . residents of one community rarely go to another community to shop, but are more likely to go to regional shopping centers out of the County.

In 2007, Claire Thompson conducted two applied research studies that demonstrated economic leakage associated with locals shopping outside of the County, and the ensuing overdependence on business sales derived from tourists. After Thompson conducted a series of educational presentations on these data, several leaders from each community agreed to meet and envision the future.

In 2008, Thompson facilitated this historically divergent group of community leaders and planned a larger educational event called the Buy Local Forum. Business leaders convened to discuss the local economy and what we could do at the grass roots level to strengthen business and local consumerism. They agreed to meet for a series of breakfast meetings where they could discuss what a local initiative would look like.

By early 2009, the Kewaunee County Buy Local Initiative started to take shape. Thompson facilitated action planning for the group. They agreed to: develop a county-wide branding effort, support business-to-business networking, strengthen direct-to-consumer marketing efforts, and develop a public education campaign about the importance and impact of buying local. A public “launch” of the initiative took place in February, 2009 with over one hundred attendees and excellent news paper coverage. Educational packets were developed and disseminated. Businesses were asked to commit to the network and attend monthly networking meetings. A steering committee was formed to help guide the effort and tackle the action steps.

At the close of 2009, significant progress has been made on each of the action steps. For the business networking component, an average of thirty individuals have attended monthly gatherings. Ninety local businesses have joined, all of which have committed to shift 10% or more of their spending to within the County, actively promote other local businesses, and participate in other activities. Thompson’s role was to develop recruitment packets and provide educational information about the importance and relevance of buying local, along with fact sheets and other information of interest to businesses at the networking meetings. All businesses were asked to fill out a baseline survey upon joining the initiative, and will fill out a follow-up survey in 2010 that will track their perceptions about the success of the initiative for their business and the local business climate.

For the consumer marketing and public education components, Thompson conducted research on other successful marketing campaign strategies and assisted with developing meaningful messages consistent with the public education efforts. With support from intern Andrea Kalis, who was hired with a UWEX District Resource Management Grant, Thompson developed an on-line business directory, fact sheets, and educational materials. They also developed a Speakers

Bureau which included education and training of volunteer speakers on the Buy Local message and recruitment of nonprofit organizations, school districts and municipalities, and a regular “Vocal Local” column in the local newspaper. A sample non-binding resolution for government units to adopt was developed, and we will look for more municipalities to adopt it in 2010.