

Economic Development Insight

What's so Important about Entrepreneurship? Ask "Joe the Plumber"

By Stephanie Fernhaber

If you have paid any attention to politics lately, you've likely heard a lively discussion about attempting to meet the needs of "Joe the Plumber" and getting back to "Main Street." What does this have to do with entrepreneurship? Carl Schramm of the Kauffman Foundation provides an interesting perspective in a recent commentary on CNN: "What appeals to me about Joe...is his dream. He speaks for men and women we all know, who want to want to own their own business, who want to make a job, not take a job."

Here in Greene County, we hear and read about these dreams every day. Marc and April Ranard have a dream to provide curbside recycling throughout Greene County. Christy James has a dream of fulfilling a need for funeral services in Eastern Greene County. Joe Fleetwood has a dream of providing healthy organic food products and gift items in Bloomfield. Sawyer Sparks has a dream of using sunflowers to produce bio-diesel fuel.

According to the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor survey in 2007, the United States ranks third among high-income countries for the rate of entrepreneurial activity. A reported 9.6% of the population is estimated to be in the early stages of starting a new business. Foreign firms want to co-locate in the United States simply to take advantage of the entrepreneurial culture that has been created. Another interesting fact is that small businesses account for 99.7% of all employers and employ half of all private-sector employees in the U.S. Entrepreneurship is important because it accounts for the majority of the businesses around us.

Entrepreneurship also leads ultimately to the creation of larger corporations that serve as major employers. SAIC was formed in 1969 by J. Robert Beyster, Ph.D. in La Jolla, California, where he experienced the normal growing pains of financial hardships. Today, SAIC has \$8.9 billion in annual revenues and employs approximately 44,000 people in more than 150 cities worldwide, and is a major employer here in Greene County.

In a telephone survey of registered voters conducted last month by the Kauffman Foundation, only 48% agree that the American dream is alive and well in light of the current economic crisis. This statistic is a bit alarming as entrepreneurial activity, driven by men and women with dreams to own their own business, is a key driver of economic growth. In comparison to other countries, entrepreneurship is a competitive advantage that the United States has historically been able to rely upon. A whopping 70% agree that the success and wealth of our economy depends on the success of entrepreneurs. More than 60% said they had the most faith and confidence in the American people and the small business owner to guide the U.S. economy. This reliance on entrepreneurs by fellow Americans comes as no surprise. Yet, at a national and local level, we need to make sure that we keep the American dream alive.

Given the tough economic times that we are facing, what can we do to help ensure that the "Joes" of Greene County have an opportunity to fulfill their dreams of owning their own businesses? Carl Schramm concludes that "What's really needed is to create an environment where citizens from all walks of life – spanning from plumbing to public relations to plastic surgery – have the opportunity to become more entrepreneurial."

It is an exciting time here in Greene County as the importance of entrepreneurship is being recognized and we are attempting to create that entrepreneurial environment or culture

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where the every-day person has the ability to pursue entrepreneurial opportunities. Some entrepreneurial activity is in the form of community benefit (non-profit) organizations or initiatives, such as the WestGate@Crane tech park and the tourism coalition that have already been rolled out. Other initiatives relating to start-up financing, entrepreneurial training and more online resources will likely be rolled out in the coming year, and that is just the beginning. Yet, to really be successful, the creation of an entrepreneurial culture requires us as a community to pull together and be open and supportive to change, ideas and new dreams being pursued.

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