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KCCI initiative lends a hand to entrepreneurs

By Dorothy Bland
MY VIEW

When Matrell Hawkins started Specialties Gourmet, a professional personal chef service, three years ago, she invested \$40,000 of her savings and still found it difficult to get her small business jump-started.

"There was no single place to get licenses, business registration, insurance requirement information and the demographic information on the city. No single referral source for commercial spaces and no single point of reference for mentoring," said Hawkins, who also owns TelConsult Inc., a Web design and telecommunications firm.

"The problem was I'd go to one agency and they'd send you to the next one. I was on the phone for days without getting any answers," said Hawkins, who was persistent and has expanded her Tallahassee business to include a culinary education service with more than 180 clients.

Hawkins' story is an example of some of the challenges that small businesses and entrepreneurs face in Tallahassee. It's why Jump Start Plan X is needed here.

Jump Start Plan X is the working title for a Knight Creative Communities Initiative to help jump-start more small businesses and make Tallahassee a more small-business-friendly environment, especially for young entrepreneurs.

"Our objective is to create a seamless environment of support for the small-business community," said Judy Jones-Colston, a KCCI catalyst.

Being a relative newcomer to Tallahassee and a veteran of chamber of commerce and economic development boards in Colorado, I admit I was skeptical about tales of Florida's capital city not being business-friendly.

In the six months I've lived here, Tallahassee has received good national press for being ranked 17th in *Forbes* magazine as a best place for business and careers and "on the verge" of being a "green leader" by *Fast Company* magazine. It's also interesting to note that about 85 percent of the Greater Tallahassee Chamber of Commerce's members have eight employees or fewer.

On the surface, it appears there is a wide variety of networking and training opportunities ranging from the Chamber's annual Community Conference July 20-21 in Ponte Vedra, to Florida A&M University's Small Business Development Center workshop on procurement opportunities this Thursday at the Workforce Plus Conference Room, 2525 S. Monroe St.

The KCCI team has uncovered several recurring issues during discussions with small-business owners including the need for what catalyst Nolia Brandt calls the "co-location" of services to assist small businesses in a central area, more flexible finance options and a potential business incubator to help boost the "creative class" - that is, people who use their talent or thinking power to make a living.

The Jump Start Plan X team is assessing what gaps exist locally. We've developed a survey asking for your input on what local business resources you're using. If you're not making use of existing services, tell us why not. We encourage small-business owners, entrepreneurs and others to go online (www.zoomerang.com/survey.zgi?p=WEB226MU4SYVJW) to share your perspectives. Responses will be tabulated after July 27 and we'll post results online at the KCCI Web site: www.kccitallahassee.wordpress.com.

The data will help us identify gaps in service and shape future initiatives to make Tallahassee more small-business friendly.

It's been said that people don't get involved because they're not asked. Consider this an invitation to small-business owners, entrepreneurs and other stakeholders to get involved with Jump Start Plan X. Your talent is needed to jump-start more business and make Tallahassee the place you want it to be.