Bibb County Celebrates AERN Membership with Ribbon Cutting Ceremony

The Alabama Entrepreneurial Research Network added a new chapter on September 20 as Bibb County joined the network in a ribbon-cutting and open-house ceremony attended by about 25 local business, government, and University leaders.

The addition of Bibb County brings the total number of AERN partners to 13 counties spread out across West Alabama.

AERN officials say Bibb’s joining the network is part of its mission to ensure that rural areas have the same resources available to them that businesses in bigger cities would have.

“AERN is entirely a rural Alabama project,” said Annette Watters, co-director of AERN, who cut the ribbon officially opening the Bibb County facility at the Chamber of Commerce office in Centreville.

The AERN program in Bibb County is funded by a grant from the Appalachian Regional Commission, which also has sponsored a number of new centers in several other counties in the network.

AERN members are provided with resources that include a desktop computer, software, books, and access to experts at the University of Alabama. The total value of the equipment and resources is estimated to be $7,500, according to Paavo Hanninen, also a co-director of AERN.

Another benefit, according to Hanninen, is the ability for people to access information about business startups and expansions on the Web and be able to use the Bruno Business Library located on the University of Alabama’s campus.

“I hope it will help people who have a dream to start a business,” said Mayor Dennis Stripling of Brent, one of the many dignitaries on hand for the ceremony.

The location in Centreville will provide services for all of Bibb County, said Nancy Lightsey, Bibb County chamber executive director. “We expect AERN to play an integral role in Bibb County’s economic future,” Lightsey said.

Wardell Harris, co-owner of Wing Castle restaurant in Centreville, said future business owners in the area have a great resource at their fingertips and that he wished they had been available to him when he was planning his business about a year ago.

He has already spent some time reading the AERN reference books and says he is planning to buy copies of some of them. He said he also hopes to use the resources to help him and his partners, Terry Bell and Tracy Norris, expand their business to another location.

Among the books that are available at the Centreville location are Franchising 101, which is a directory for someone looking to open a franchise; From Kitchen to Marketplace, which describes how to transform your best food ideas and family recipes into a business; How to Buy a Business; Restaurant Start-up Guide; and The Complete Small Business Legal Guide. Harris would like to see AERN expand its resource book collection to include more books about using the Internet as a business tool.

AERN also provides access to the Alabama Virtual Library and Business Source Premier, a database of thousands of trade publications.

Jonathan Stinson
Linda Gibson, who operated a country store for 36 years, just had to get back into owning a business. And she did so by taking a 180-degree turn.

With the help of AERN partner Nancy Gibson (no relation), executive director of the Choctaw County Chamber of Commerce and Community Development Foundation, and the AERN resources at the Chamber, she is now the proud owner of Choctaw Wireless, 520 East Pushmataha Street (Highway 10) in Butler.

Members of her staff are Karen Downey, Brittany Beacton and Tonia Grice (Linda’s daughter). Linda says she is especially proud of her service-minded staff.

Business owners will tell you ownership gets in your blood, but why the big change from milk and bread to cell phones, from household items to two-way radios?

“When you look at what people of all ages—from children to older adults—want, well, everybody has a cell phone,” Linda said. “Technology is changing, and we wanted to bring the local touch we learned in the country store business to a new kind of retail business.”

Choctaw Wireless sells SouthernLINC and Unicel, which has been purchased by Verizon, products along with the accessories that go with the full range of cell phones and related electronic devices.

“Our main job right now,” Linda said, “is getting the word out in time for the Christmas shopping season.” She said she was looking into qualifying for co-op advertising with her suppliers.

Linda was helped along the way by knowing the previous owner of Choctaw Wireless. “I went into the store one day to ask about her children. One thing led to another and we found out she wanted to sell and I wanted to buy.”

Nancy Gibson was a big help, she said. “I attended sales tax and small business workshops that Nancy led and she also introduced me to a reference entitled How to Buy a Business,” Linda said. “The AERN office answered my questions and helped me stay on course.”

The new management has been in place about two months. “We are now making sure we stock the most popular items and accessories that go with this kind of business,” Linda said.

Senator Sessions Tours AERN Facility in Fayette

United States Senator Jeff Sessions discussed economic issues with residents of Fayette County and University of Alabama guests during a tour of the AERN site at the historic Depot Museum on August 20

“Sessions requested the meeting in Fayette County,” said Annette Watters, co-director of AERN. “and the Fayette office was gracious to host the meeting. All were impressed with Senator Sessions’ interest and knowledge of rural Alabama economic issues.”

The purpose of the senator’s visit was to tour the Alabama Entrepreneurial Research Network for which he had high praise.

Louise Nolen and the membership of the Luxapilala Chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution provided a home cooked lunch of ham, vegetables, and a selection of desserts for a group of about 40 people. The vegetables were grown by Nolen in her own garden and prepared in her

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About 20 county partners and University of Alabama leaders attended the annual meeting of AERN on June 28 on the campus of The University of Alabama. Partners representing Hale, Monroe, Wilcox, Choctaw, Fayette, Perry, and Macon counties—just over half the county partners—heard an appeal to “get the word out” about AERN resources and opportunities.

Dr. Ed Mullins and intern Richard Mullins, Mullins’ grandson, a journalism major at Asbury College in Kentucky, conducted a session on writing press releases, working with the media, increasing visual impact in photos and other materials, and how to maintain close contact with local media.

Richard conducted a session on photography, covering ways to avoid the “grip and grin” shots. “If you are writing about a speaker or reporting on an award, take a photo in the person’s own setting doing what he does for a living or as a volunteer. Action shots will draw more eyes that staged shots.”

Growing up in the country, Sessions had high praise for the culinary talents of the women who provided the meal.

Following lunch, Paavo Hanninen, also an AERN co-director, and Watters gave an informative overview describing the growth of the network and gave Senator Sessions a tour that demonstrated some of the valuable resources available for establishing and growing businesses.

Sessions, 62, is a native of the region served by AERN. He was born in Selma and grew up in Hybart, on the Wilcox/Monroe county line. He speaks often of the core values of honesty, hard work, belief in God, and parental respect that are the hallmarks of rural life. He received his bachelor’s degree from Huntingdon College in Montgomery and his law degree from The University of Alabama.

(Thanks to Teresa Sanders, editor of the Fayette Times-Record for her contributions to this article.)
Ed said, “The main thing a PR person can do is provide information in advance of the event you want to promote so that the newspaper or broadcast outlet will have time to get your message in the form they need to print or air it. Then, you can get double exposure to your news by convincing the local medium that they should send a reporter on the day of your event and take a photo.”

Ed gave writing tips such as using familiar words, short sentences, and action verbs. Ed also offered the advice that local papers are short staffed and frequently are happy to run news stories about organizations if the writing is organized tightly and written in journalistic style. Send in a followup story yourself, he said.

Annette Watters presided over the meeting and handed out copies of the book Twenty Years of Alabama History and Alabama Business 1986-2006 as a gift from Dr. J. Barry Mason, the Dean of the College of Commerce, to the AERN partners attending the meeting.

Librarian Karen Chapman described to the partners the upgrades and enhancements she envisions for the AERN website over the next year or so. Chapman wants to add many features that will help entrepreneurs in Alabama succeed in their endeavors.

After a delicious lunch and the awarding of door prizes, the partners each went home with a copy of an AERN-specific Media Handbook to help them promote the availability of the excellent AERN resources in their offices.

**Alabama Entrepreneurial Research Network**

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