New AERN Sites in Monroeville and Butler Gearing up

New Alabama Entrepreneurial Research Network partners in Monroeville and Butler are eagerly preparing to open new centers in these county seat towns in southwest Alabama.

The new centers will have the latest reference materials and access to assistance for starting new businesses, said Sandy Smith, executive director of the Monroeville Area Chamber of Commerce, and Ben Smith, mayor of Butler. They will also have resources for making existing businesses more profitable and efficient.

Opening these new centers under the auspices of local chambers of commerce will make access to AERN’s resources available locally for current and future business operators in two more counties, as well as to staff and chamber members. It expands the network to nine counties: Choctaw, Dallas, Greene, Hale, Marengo, Monroe, Perry, Sumter and Wilcox.

Both sites will receive computers loaded with business software not now readily available in Monroeville and Butler. They will also get a set of business reference books especially selected by the AERN staff and Bruno Business Library specialists, as well as access to the Bruno Library’s professional librarians for their business questions.

These affiliates and members of the public will also gain the opportunity to attend special continuing business education and training programs offered by AERN on site and in Tuscaloosa.

“The new centers are a huge bonus to our areas,” said Sandy Smith. “Not only will this help with training of our own staff but also will give us more opportunity to offer business seminars to the public. Currently, the closest AERN site to us is in Camden, about an hour’s drive.”

Both chambers have dedicated space especially for their AERN centers.

“We will host an open house to let the public know about the center,” Sandy Smith said, and shortly after that will schedule a series of seminars on topics such as “How to Start Your Own Small Business,” “Financing Options,” and “How to Expand Your Market Share.”

Nancy Gibson has just been named executive director of the Chamber in Butler, Mayor Ben Smith said. He expects the Butler center to

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be fully operational by April. “We’ve been talking with the folks at the University about this for two years, knowing that we will feel the benefit for existing businesses right away through help in such things as business startups, obtaining business licenses, handling payroll taxes, capitalizing new and existing businesses, and the like,” he said.

Sandy Smith said the AERN operation in Monroeville will observe the same hours as the Chamber, Monday through Friday, 9 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., or by appointment. Chamber offices are located at 36 N. Alabama Avenue and the phone number is 251-743-2879.

In Butler, AERN will also have its own office, in an upstairs suite of a medical clinic at No. 1 Independence Square. For more information about the Butler AERN center, call the Chamber at 205-459-3795.

The challenges for rural America in the Wal-Mart era have affected every business and consumer, Sandy Smith said. “Even the stable wood and wood products industry of our area has taken a hit. All of rural America must have more options as we replace the old manufacturing economy with a service economy,” she said.

Something Old, Something(s) New: Sources to Start, Improve Your Business

In its ongoing efforts to provide the latest and most useful business information to its members, AERN has placed a number of new books at its centers around the state.

Here are brief summaries:

- Franchising 101 serves as a user-friendly directory for the potential franchisee pursuing an established franchise.

- From Kitchen to Marketplace describes how to transform your gourmet food ideas and family recipes from “small potatoes” into a business to feed the masses.

- How to Buy a Business is a step-by-step guide to buying into a tried-and-true business.

- Restaurant Start-up Guide and Complete Small Business Legal Guide, respectively, help the entrepreneur cook his or her business without cooking the books!

The familiar saying, “the only thing that stays the same is change,” also applies to AERN sources. For example recently one of the free (paid by the state) Alabama Virtual Library (AVL) business resources, Business Source Premier (BSP), was upgraded (see http://www.avl.lib.al.us/).

Imagine getting a free upgrade from coach to first class. The changes are most evident in the interface. The amount of content has been increased and is now even more useful to AERN clients. BSP includes industry reports and thousands of trade publications. For example, say you are the owner of a dry cleaning business and you want to read trade publications to move ahead. With BSP you can easily search and read online issues of American Drycleaner.

Another virtual resource in the AVL business lineup is the Business & Company Resource Center. This resource can

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help the entrepreneur in the essential background research to get an idea off the ground. Take the carpentry business. One can do a search and read a detailed profile giving the ins and outs of this industry. Excerpt: “Carpenters make up one of the largest building trade groups in the U.S. (1.2 million jobs in 2000) where 1/4 were self-employed.”

At the Bruno Business Library at The University of Alabama, we underscore our continued service commitment to you.

AERN Seminar To Be Offered at UA in April

“Water, water everywhere/ Nor any a drop to drink.”

The dilemma of Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s ancient mariner—surrounded by all that undrinkable salt water—is similar to what today’s business entrepreneur faces, according to Lee Pike, professor and head of the Angelo Bruno Business Library at The University of Alabama.

There is so much information available even experienced business people can feel swamped. The challenge is to turn salt water into drinking water.

And that’s what Pike and other members of the AERN team will be doing on the UA campus on Friday, April 8, in the electronic classroom of the Bruno Library, in a training session for AERN center partners.

Open to all staff at the AERN sites, the session will focus on the most basic of terms and concepts, Pike said. “We will draw on examples and practices relevant to small business,” he said. “We will introduce the chambers’ staffs to what goes into a successful business plan and how to write it so they can help their constituents. We’ll cover information sources such as tax, bookkeeping, and how to find and apply for loans and grants to help a business get started or to expand.”

Pike and the other AERN leaders, including Annette Watters and Paavo Hanninen, AERN project directors, will lead participants through a variety of practical exercises. They will offer instruction on how to use the AERN Web site (http://aern.cba.ua.edu). They will go over two primary databases available for business entrepreneurs, the “Business Source Premier” (EBSCO) and “Business and Company Resource Center” (Gale), as well as teaching them how to use the World Wide Web for business information.

“We operate from the premise that small advances in business knowledge can make a big difference,” Pike said. “We will keep it simple, while identifying and explaining the highly useful resources available here and in the AERN centers. We will draw on examples for successful businesses and help them in their areas of interest in their communities, along with providing information on finding demographic and market data.”

Pike and other instructors will also introduce the trainees to the most useful trade publications.

“We think this is an especially good opportunity for our AERN partners,” Pike said. “The workshop gives them a chance to visit our campus and see our resources first hand, resources that are also available to them.”

We eagerly look forward to meeting with you and your clients on our periodic training visits.

Please continue to spread the AERN word in your communities. Furthermore, do not hesitate to contact us with your business information needs. You can send us an email from the AERN website (http://aern.cba.ua.edu/) by clicking on “Ask a Librarian.”

Lee Pike, professor and head of the Angelo Bruno Business Library

Paul Brothers teaching in one of the electronic classrooms of the Bruno/Bashinsky Business Library.
Valarie Ezell, acting director of the Sumter County Industrial Development Authority, received training in February by AERN staffers Paavo Hanninen and Todd Hines.

“I was very excited and interested in what they presented,” Ezell said. “The information is already proving to be very useful to me as I help Sumter County citizens start or upgrade their businesses.”

The new Sumter AERN Center is located at 104 Hospital Drive in Livingston. Ezell said the space and location are more than adequate for their needs. She expects use of AERN resources by Sumter County residents to increase as more people learn about the facility. “We invite the citizens of Sumter County to come by the facility and find out how useful the new resources can be for their businesses,” she said.

In field training the Tuscaloosa AERN staff teaches staff members at the AERN centers and local chambers and industrial authorities to use a variety of computer programs, books, and other references available to the centers through AERN grants. The local staff person then teaches local residents how to use the resources.

Regarding recent economic activity in Sumter County, Ezell reports, “Mannington Wood Floors bought 10 acres of property in the county, bringing 30 new jobs for Sumter Countians immediately, with the prospect of creating 86 more.”