



Open for Business

Polk County becomes a Certified Entrepreneurial Community

Tucked in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains in the isothermal belt, Polk County is blessed with a temperate climate and terrain that attracts many retirees, families and businesses. Primarily an agri-based culture, Polk County is home to more than 500 equestrian businesses including trainers, boarders, breeders, sales, veterinarians, tack stores and many special horse shows.

The three main towns of Tryon, Saluda and Columbus all offer lively downtown areas with local shopping, dining and friendly people. The county also boasts an excellent education system with well-funded and highly rated schools as well as a passion for community and economic development, which is why Polk County became a Certified Entrepreneurial Community in 2010.

“Polk County has always been a beautiful and welcoming community,” says Ambrose Mills, CEC Team Leader and EDC Chair. “But by going through the CEC process with AdvantageWest, we now have the resources, leadership and strategic plan in place to truly say we are entrepreneurial-ready.”

Obtaining the CEC certification took three years and required considerable commitment by the entire 12-member EDC board, including team leaders Mills and County Manager Ryan Whitson, as well as Lynn Sprague,

Director of Polk County Agriculture Economic Development; Craig Hilton; Libbie Johnson; and Bob Morgan, Vice Chair, EDC. But the team says it was well worth it.

Some of the benefits Polk County will receive through the CEC program include participation in a co-op marketing campaign through AdvantageWest to attract new businesses to the area, permanent highway signage showing the CEC designation and inclusion in a new CEC website. Polk County also has improved access to capital through AdvantageWest’s Advantage Opportunity Loan Fund, leadership development opportunities and peer-to-peer networking with other CEC communities in the region.

“Polk County exemplifies the reasons why it is beneficial for communities to become CECs,” says Pam Lewis, Senior VP of Entrepreneurial Development, AdvantageWest. “They have established a clear strategic plan and enthusiastic leadership team, including Ambrose and Lynn, who will be the driving forces behind the amazing entrepreneurial spirit and business growth in the area for years to come.”

With one horse to every three people in the county, Lynn Sprague believes that Polk’s livelihood depends on growing its agricultural base.

“The equestrian industry contributes close to \$75 million to Polk County,” he says. “If you create resources and programs centered on growing the agricultural industry, then you will sustain long-term rural growth here.”

Part of that rural growth is the opening of The Mill Spring Agricultural Development Center in the old Mill Spring Elementary School. The Center is a resource for agricultural development, farmland preservation, education, community service and business development and is dedicated to sustaining economic growth and the rural character of Polk County. Built in 1928, the building is going through its first phase of renovations but already has several tenants, including five artists, an herbalist, a soil and water conservation company, and woodworker Chris Carroll.

“By achieving CEC certification, we are recognized for our commitment to encourage and support entrepreneurship while improving the business climate for existing companies in Polk County.”

Ambrose Mills
CEC Team Leader and EDC Chair



On top of the world. Chris Carroll starts new woodworking business.

“The community support in Polk County is amazing. Everyone helps each other so that we can all succeed.”

Chris Carroll
Owner,
Carroll Woodcraft Unlimited

“The Center has helped me out in so many ways,” says Carroll, who also went through the GATE (Growing America Through Entrepreneurship) Program. “When work at my old job dried up, they provided me with an affordable space to build my new business and access to donated lumber that I can use to make anything a customer imagines. They gave me a way to make a living and now I am going to be able to hire a few more people for the spring.”

The Center works on a limited budget, so the support of the community and organizations like AdvantageWest is crucial.

“We receive donations every day, whether it’s folks dropping off lumber, office supplies or even refrigeration equipment,” says Sprague. “We have had more than 400 volunteers donate 1600 hours of time so far and AdvantageWest continues to help us grow. Recently they found two architects who are going to volunteer their services to help us better preserve this beautiful building.”

Like Polk County, The Mill Spring Agricultural Development Center is an entrepreneurial community in progress. Future projects may include a commercial culinary center, a retail farm store and weekly radio programs broadcast from the school’s auditorium – the possibilities are endless!

Polk County may be agriculturally driven, but it also has a high-speed data network in place, which has made the area attractive to high-tech companies like Kiveo, which builds websites and web-based applications.

Kiveo’s three owners – Jeremy Edgell, Miles Phillips and Briley Hooper – had moved to Polk County to work for another digital company. When the company decided to move out of the area, they decided to start Kiveo.

“We have been lucky to surround ourselves with some very good people,” says Phillips. “Thanks to the support of the community – including Tryon’s mayor, who personally campaigned for us – we were able to stay in Polk County, move into a building that is three to four times the size of our old building and triple our staff.”

“One of the reasons why I wanted to start a business in Polk County is that it felt like home,” says Edgell. “It meant a lot to us to be able to stay here.”

For more information about the CEC program, visit www.awcec.com.



A shop of his own, Chris Carroll.