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Co-ops provide options for economic challenges

• Workshops show how Homer could benefit from cooperative business style

By Naomi Klouda
Homer Tribune
November 21, 2007

The idea of "many hands make light work for all" isn't only a family axiom, it's the basis for business cooperatives. And it's a message that Andrew McLeod, a cooperative development specialist with the Northwest Cooperative Development Center in Olympia, Wash., brought to Homer last week in order to bolster ideas for local cooperatives. McLeod's workshops were sponsored by the University of Alaska's Cooperative Development Program.



HOMER TRIBUNE/Naomi Klouda

Andrew McLeod, a cooperative development specialist with Northwest Cooperative Development Center in Olympia, Wash., is assisting Homer businesses as the find ways to make their co-ops more effective.

"Economic changes have led to some dramatic shifts in economies of smaller communities," McLeod said. Major chains selling imports capture a growing share of the market, often squeezing small businesses that find operations expensive. One way to combat that force for a stronger economy is through businesses banding together. McLeod said the advantages of a co-op are significant. Homer is no stranger to the model: local co-ops include the Homer Electric Association, Ptarmigan Arts and Kachemak Shellfish Growers Cooperatives. Ulmer's is a member of the True Value cooperative.

"The co-op is controlled by people benefiting from it rather than by outside investors, so the surplus dollars can be distributed among the members," McLeod said. The economic advantages of co-ops involve pooling resources for best dollar value. "Co-ops support small businesses," McLeod said. "They can make a difference on whether a business can survive."

Generic tasks businesses share in common – marketing, payroll, accounting and purchasing materials - provide possibilities for joining forces, he said.

According to McLeod, there are many models for co-ops. The first one created in this country is credited to the paragon inventor Benjamin Franklin. He came up with the Philadelphia Contributionship, a force of homeowners who pooled funds for fire protection before fire departments were established. Farming co-ops followed not long after that.

Along with a public workshop on cooperatives, McLeod conducted a workshop for the 14-member Kachemak Shellfish Growers Association.

"He was great at giving us ideas," said Marie Bader, vice president of the association. "He emphasized that the committee system is an organization that has to be fully functional."

In other words, if tasks are divided among committee members, "everyone does the leg work," Bader said. Distribution of oysters to local, Anchorage and then national markets is pooled at the shellfish co-op. They also share marketing costs. This cuts costs considerably to each member, Bader said.



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“Our co-op is unique because many agricultural co-ops are made up of 500 to 5,000 members. That’s a lot of hands doing the work for many,” Bader said. “Whereas, ours is 14 members. Each one of them needs to be tapped for their expertise and energies – and that’s one big thing he (McLeod) pointed out.”

The idea, McLeod told the group, is to not only create a committee, but also to give them specific powers for completing a task so they don’t have to come back and see their efforts undone.

Still, McLeod said some are discouraged by group endeavors.

“What causes hesitation is that some people have had bad experiences working in groups,” he said. “A lot of that is poor organization.”

Collective control means a co-op needs to delegate or it won’t be effective. Members can also free up time by hiring out work in order to allow them to focus on an area they most want to work on.

Some individual trade practices work against businesses, McLeod points out. For example, Alaska salmon products shipped to Seattle for processing and then shipped back to Alaska stores and restaurants is a wasteful effort. When co-ops examine their own practices, they can often take the waste out.

“It can’t be more economical to ship out of Alaska and then back.

That’s just bonkers,” he said. “There has to be a better way than that.”

According to McLeod, Homer’s economy could benefit from more networking between businesses, even if the co-op is limited in its mission.

For example, looking at Homer’s small restaurants, McLeod said much could likely be gained from buying groceries from a single Anchorage haul, rather than each shipping down foods separately. McLeod’s role at the Northwest Cooperative Development Center involves helping co-ops by providing information and technical assistance as they try to form, as well as finding grants. He formerly lived in Homer prior to moving to Olympia, Wash.

For more information on the Northwest Cooperative Development Center, go to www.nwcdc.coop.

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