

# Development group helps businesses

By Kimberly Davis

*The Oberlin Herald*  
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With an active board, the Oberlin-Decatur County Economic Development Corp. has attracted new businesses to the area and helped existing ones expand.

The board of seven county residents and a marketing director meets once a month.

The board includes Greg Lohofener and Bob Streyve, appointed by the county commissioners; Randy Ostmyer, owner of Culligan Water Conditioning, appointed by the Oberlin City Council; Doug Claussen on behalf of the Oberlin-Decatur County Area Chamber of Commerce; and hospital Administrator Lynn Doeden and Vickie Bailey of Jennings, owner of Decatur County Abstract, as at-large members chosen by the board. There is also an opening for a city appointed member.

The purpose of the group, said Connie Grafel, is to help existing county businesses expand and attract new businesses.

That includes helping businesses to get in touch with the right people for help. For example, she said, the board was able to help Cabinetland Industries connect with a company to help them save money on energy.

People can come to the board when they want to start or expand a business and are looking for money.

A year ago, said Ms. Grafel, the corporation received a grant from the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Rural Development Administration for \$85,000 to start a revolving loan fund. The agency had to raise a \$15,000 local match. The board can loan that money to businesses, she said, and once it is paid back, then the board can loan it out again to another business.

So far, she added, they have been able to help Stellar Sales, a new used car business, and have an application in from the Re-Load, a restaurant and bar which is relocating downtown.

The revolving-loan fund, she said, is to help low-to-moderate-income people, who might not be able to borrow money elsewhere.

The board also has money for microloans of up to \$15,000 from the Kansas Department of Commerce.

The board is run on money allocated by the city, half a mill in the county property tax levy and rental income from business property.

The group got \$14,000 from the county this year and \$41,343 from the city, which includes the director's salary.

Actual revenue in 2006 was \$48,378, said Ms. Grafel, with expenses at \$59,421.

Mr. Lohofener, the board chairman, said they bought land and equipment with money the group received in 2005 from PrairieLand Electric Power Co. of Norton, a rural cooperative which serves much of Decatur County.

He said the budget didn't reflect that money, adding that the board also got an extra \$15,000 from the City of Oberlin in 2005 to purchase property on U.S. 83 north of Sappa Valley Construction.

Over the years, said Ms. Grafel, the board has tried lots of things. Some business ventures have worked and others haven't.

In 2000, she said, Wheat Ridge Retirement Apartments, an independent living facility, with 12 apartments for seniors, opened in Oberlin. The board helped raise money to build the facility while the original management firm, the Evangelical Lutheran Good Samaritan Society, put up some money and the county approved a bond issue.

A few years later, she said, the board worked to help Oberlin businessman Ron Fowler to open Crossroads Express, a truck plaza and convenience store at the intersection of U.S. 36 and U.S. 83 near The Gateway.

The group was able to start an industrial park north of town on U.S. 83, sparked by Sappa Valley Construction wanting to expand.

Other successes, she said, have been helping bring in Dollar General, the Blue Sky car wash, Gorman Tarps formerly of Great Bend, expansion at Fidele Electric and establishing Creative Dimensions, a locally owned cabinet business.

Two and a half years ago, the corporation bought a former bank building at 104 S. Penn Avenue to establish the Business Entrepreneurial Enhancement Center through a loan with Prairie Land. The board also had to get an irrevocable letter of credit using the building and CDs they have at The Bank to finance the deal.

The building houses four businesses, the Chamber of Commerce and the economic development office.

The idea, said Ms. Grafel, is to help new businesses get started. The building is a good location for walk-in traffic, she said. The businesses



**AT THE FARMERS AND RANCHERS APPRECIATION DINNER**, sponsored by the Decatur County Area Chamber of Commerce, board members Bryan Loker and Pam Wilson helped give away hundreds of dollars in prizes.

— Photo by Cynthia Haynes/The Oberlin Herald

pay rent, but it costs less than if the owners would start in their own building.

Recently, the board worked with Bus and Coach International, which started a business in Jennings to import over-the-road buses made in China. Since then, said Ms. Grafel, the board has helped get the company in touch with people in the state development agencies to help with incentives.

The board is always looking at new ideas, she said, and held an information meeting on producing cellulosic ethanol, an alcohol fuel additive made from waste and trash plants rather than feed grains.

Also, the board, is helping with the proposed runway improvement project at the Oberlin airport, an idea that began with a request from Bus and Coach International.

It is important to have someone in the development office, she said, because it helps bring continuity to what the state offers. She is able to network with lots of people and learn information which might help the county.

More things could be done here, she said, if there was more venture-capital available. The state and federal agencies do the best they can for the area, she said, and the Department of Agriculture has been good to this county.

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