

COUNTY PUMPS UP BUSINESS

Program Aims To Help Local Enterprises Expand Markets

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Lisa Smith, an eight-year employee with Friendship Industries, packs up small toll booth tags headed for Puerto Rico on Wednesday at the Harrisonburg company's location. Friendship Industries recently participated in Rockingham County's new economic development initiative that seeks to help new and existing businesses succeed by providing market data. (Photos by Jason Lenhart / DN-R)



Racheal Davis wraps up cardboard at Friendship Industries on Wednesday. Friendship Industries offers a variety of services, from providing third-party logistics to performing packaging services and certified document destruction. Rockingham County used data from the organization to generate a profile of the people it serves.



Darest Taylor assembles the components for packages that will go into a U.S. Air Force flight vest, providing pilots with first aid and escape-and-evasion tools, Wednesday at Friendship Industries.

HARRISONBURG — Rockingham County officials plan to reach out to local businesses to find ways for them to be more successful.

The business retention and expansion campaign isn't exactly new, but county officials recently formalized it and partnered with the Shenandoah Valley Small Business Development Center to reach out to local entrepreneurs.

“It’s been slowly evolving over time, and we just decided now is the time to do it — to really focus on trying to help the small businesses in our community succeed,” said John Meck, development manager for Rockingham County.

Meck said the goal is to meet with as many of Rockingham County’s nearly 1,400 business owners as possible to offer assistance.

One of the services county staff can offer is detailed market data from Texas-based research firm Buxton.

“It’s basically data that was put together for use by larger retailers, Wal-Mart, Target, places like that,” he said. “It helps the small business understand their consumer better and provides them information they can use to market to their consumer better.”

A recent beneficiary of the program is Friendship Industries, a nonprofit organization that provides employment opportunities and training to people with disabilities.

County staff used data from the organization to generate a profile of the people it serves.

“The program participants we serve are actually a reflection of the demographics of Harrisonburg and Rockingham, which was a big surprise to us,” said Sandra Quigg, community resource director. “We thought we’d reflect a portion of the community, not the entire community.”

The county also provided information about donors so Friendship Industries could get a better idea of who's likely to support the organization.

And market research helped dissuade Friendship Industries officials from investing in a business venture because the data showed it to be a losing proposition.

While the program is aimed at existing businesses and organizations, it could also be used to guide would-be entrepreneurs.

Joyce Krech, director of business development center, said people often want to start their own company but don't know what kind of business to get into.

The data could be used to show where there are opportunities and identify where the market is saturated, even down to the location.

For example, research might show that a pizza shop would do well in one part of the county but face an uphill battle in another location.

"This kind of market research and analysis we can provide can prevent some mistakes and, hopefully, lead them into a more profitable venture," Krech said.

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