



Vernon Economic Development Association

By Kathy Neidert, VEDA Board Member

VEDA Observes 10 Year of Success

Happy Anniversary! This month the Vernon Economic Development Association (VEDA) is celebrating its 10th year of coordinating economic development in Vernon County. In June 2007, VEDA hired Sue Noble as its first executive director to work with a group of community leaders and business executives from throughout our county who saw the need to create economic wealth and prosperity while preserving our rural Vernon County lifestyle.

VEDA is a 501(c) 3 non-profit organization funded by memberships and donations; we are not a county department nor do we receive financial support from the county budget. Our activities are governed by a volunteer, elected board of directors and managed by an executive director, our only paid staff. While we receive grants for specific projects, we rely on tax deductible contributions from individuals, businesses and municipalities to cover operating expenses. VEDA fosters entrepreneurship, helps new and expanding businesses in numerous ways, and provides technical assistance, educational forums, and resources to municipalities, local organizations and businesses.

"We have a lot to be proud of in our 10 years of work," said Noble. VEDA's accomplishments include the following:

- Leveraging more than \$7 million in grant funding and investments for economic projects in the region and helping create a total of 175 jobs;
- Serving more than 500 businesses through one-to-one counseling which fostered the creation of 15 new businesses and more than 80 jobs;
- Obtaining a \$600,000 grant for flood recovery loans to 36 businesses in Chaseburg, Hillsboro, La Farge, Ontario, Readstown, Viola, Viroqua and Westby. Repayments are also adding more than \$450,000 to the county revolving loan fund to assist other businesses;
- Developing the former NCR building into the Food Enterprise Center for multiple businesses to startup and expand;
- Assisting the Fifth Season Cooperative to coordinate selling local meat, produce, dairy and value-added products to institutional markets, helping more than 100 area business members by providing access to new markets;
- Assisting the Community Hunger Solutions project to source good quality produce from more than 50 local farms and deliver it to food pantries and meal sites throughout the region. More than 420,000 pounds of food, equating to 350,000 meals, have been provided;
- Facilitating the Inventors and Entrepreneurs Club which meets the second Wednesday of every month and has helped create 10 new businesses and 40 new jobs.

VEDA's activities have been recognized in state and national media. This past April, Wisconsin Public TV aired a "Wisconsin Foodie" program highlighting three businesses

operating out of the Food Enterprise Center. In November 2016, the national *Business In Focus* magazine featured an article on Vernon County's history of innovation and cooperation which Noble provided the information for. In April 2015, the U.S. Department of Commerce brought an international delegation of leaders from 26 countries to tour the Food Enterprise Center and study strategies for economic development in rural areas. For her work as VEDA's executive director, Noble was recognized in 2012 by the Small Business Administration as a Home Based Business Champion for Wisconsin and six states in the Midwest, and in 2011 by the White House as a Rural Champion of Change.

There are now 15 tenants renting space and operating their businesses out of the Food Enterprise Center, which has become a state-of-the-art aggregation, storage, processing and distribution center. LuSa Organics, one of the first tenants to locate in the building and expand its home-based business, ships its products all over the world. Tenant Kickapoo Coffee, which buys and roasts fair trade coffee beans sourced from farmer cooperatives in East Africa, and Central and South America, continues to grow and add staff. Other businesses working out of the Center include Artisan Deli Foods, Azizi Chocolates, B&E's Trees, Community Hunger Solutions, Driftless Co-Option, Field Notes Farm, Fifth Season Cooperative, Fizeology, Nami Chips, Plovgh, Sole Expressions Dance Studio Co-op, Wisco Pop and the VEDA offices.

Organic Valley, GoMacro and Earthfire Products also rent storage space in our facility. All together, there are at least 65 employees working at the Center. In 2014, the Food Enterprise Center earned a Wisconsin Top Rural Development Initiative Award for partnerships and collaborations in creating positive community impacts. "We create the environment for economic development to occur; the businesses create the jobs and increase the tax base," says Noble.

If you would like to become a member of VEDA and help support a coordinated effort to economic development in our region, go to our membership webpage at ... <http://veda-wi.org/Join.html>. We look forward to your partnership!