

A helping hand

Northwest Kentucky Forward assisting local companies with retention, expansion and promotion

By Jonathan Watkins

Gleaner correspondent

Despite tough economic times throughout much of the U.S., one local agency is committed to helping existing businesses in our region prosper.

This economic-development organization, Northwest Kentucky Forward (NWKF), is a not-for-profit, public-private endeavor with both government and business investors from a four-county region. This region includes Henderson, McLean, Union and Webster counties.

“Soon after NWKF began operating in 2005, the agency discovered the need to assist businesses that are already located in northwest Kentucky,” said Cj Maple, Manager for Existing Business at NWKF.

And thus was born the Existing Business Initiative and the newly-created position filled by Maple.

“Basically, our role is to assist businesses with retention, expansion and promotion,” Maple said. “And I also serve as an advocate for our businesses, helping them resolve concerns or issues by cutting through the red tape at the local and state levels.”

According to Maple, NWKF serves 131 existing businesses within its region. These businesses include areas such as manufacturing, warehousing, distribution and other companies that qualify for state-incentive programs.

There are several ways that NWKF can assist local businesses with retention, expansion and promotion.

First, Maple visits each of her 131 “clients” at least once a year to obtain business updates and to discuss possible expansion opportunities and NWKF programs.

“I ask businesses, ‘What can I do for you?’ and ‘What do you need from Northwest Kentucky Forward?’” Maple said.

She added that some of the area companies were a little apprehensive at first to receive outside help when she began at NWKF in September of 2006, but she has been able to develop strong working relationships with these businesses over the past two years.

“I’ve been in the business world at the district, regional and corporate levels for 18 years,” said Maple, whose background is Human Resources and Safety. “I know their lingo, and I have learned that listening is a very important skill in this job.”

In addition to on-site visits, NWKF holds bi-monthly HR (Human Resources) Council Breakfasts and semi-annual Leaders’ Round Table meetings in Henderson for all four counties. Similar programs are also held in Union, Webster and McLean counties.

These events help company leaders stay up-to-date with current issues, as well as provide an opportunity for networking among area businesses.

In addition, General Managers/Plant Managers are taken out for a one-on-one lunch to help strengthen the working relationships, the Manager of Existing Business said.

The economic-development group also tries to offer relevant training programs to meet the needs of its businesses at any given time.

“Workforce (development) is dear to my heart,” Maple said. “Businesses are crying out for workforce training, and this training is just so important. They now understand that all of our programs are offered as a service at no charge.”

Plant Manager Mark Stanczyk of Shamrock Technologies in Henderson said he truly appreciates the training programs coordinated by NWKF.

“As a small company, it’s not always easy to set up training development,” Stanczyk said. “Northwest Kentucky Forward pulls together other small businesses like us and offers different training programs.”

Shamrock Technologies has approximately 80 employees spread across three plants in Henderson County, with its main operation located on Community Drive.

These facilities convert industrial scrap Polytetrafluoroethylene (PTFE), more commonly known as Teflon®, into very fine micronized powder. This powder is then used in products such as inks and paints to provide a protective coating.

“The ink of this (Henderson Business) magazine doesn’t rub off because of PTFE,” Stanczyk explained. “When the ink dries, our product creates a protective layer on the surface.”

Shamrock Technologies began its operation in Henderson County about 15 years ago and has been continuously growing. In fact, it recently completed an expansion with the help of NWKF.

“They told us what programs were available and which grants we could apply for,” Stanczyk said. “They also helped us with the paperwork and meeting deadlines.”

With the assistance of NWKF, Shamrock Technologies was approved for approximately \$350,000 in tax incentives by the Kentucky Economic Development Finance Authority to support the company’s expansion project, according to the NWKF Web site.

These incentives enabled Shamrock Technologies to purchase an 80,000 square-foot facility, formerly the Millstone Coffee plant, on Industrial Park Drive in Henderson.

“This new facility has created more storage and more jobs,” Stanczyk said. “We added about 15 new jobs and are still looking to expand and grow.”

He said “the future looks good” for the local operation because it is much more cost effective for Shamrock Technologies to keep its production here than near its corporate headquarters in Newark, N.J.

Maple said she is currently working with at least ten other companies who are planning to expand their operations in the four-county region within the next six months to a year.

In addition to helping businesses such as Shamrock Technologies receive assistance for expansion, NWKF also helps companies apply for grants and tax credits for workforce training programs. The Kentucky Cabinet for Economic Development offers both of these types of incentives through its Bluegrass State Skills Corporation (BSSC). NWKF also promotes training grants available through Henderson Community College.

During the past fiscal year (which ended June 30), more than \$165,000 was awarded to businesses in BSSC training grants/credits and more than \$970,000 in training grants through HCC.

Chris Vaughn, Human Resource Manager at Shamrock Technologies, said he appreciates NWKF serving as a “vital link between industry and (state and local) programs.”

“Cj Maple explains all of the programs that are out there for us,” Vaughn said.

He and Stanczyk have been very impressed with Maple’s support.

“She’s very good,” Stanczyk said. “She really enjoys her job and is enthusiastic about what she is doing – which goes a long way.”

Maple said her job at NWKF “is just our way of saying, ‘Thank you for doing business in our four-county region.’”

For more information about NWKF’s Existing Business Initiative, contact Maple at 826-7505.