

# **Entrepreneurship and Community Vitality: A Report of Ten Public Deliberation Forums Across Iowa**

*EXECUTIVE SUMMARY*

*January 2003*



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## Executive Summary

During October to December 2002, a series of community forums on the topic “Entrepreneurship and Community Vitality” was held at 10 locations around Iowa. The Entrepreneurship forum series was a project sponsored by the newly created Community Vitality Center — a multi-institutional consortium lead by community leaders from across the state. This collaborative project was carried out by the Iowa Consensus Project a program of the Iowa Peace Institute, Iowa State University Extension, USDA Rural Development and with the help of project team members representing diverse interests and local forum host committees from ten Iowa communities.

Forum locations ranged from the county with the smallest population to a metropolitan area. Forums were hosted in Jefferson County (Fairfield), Adams County (Corning), Cass County (Atlantic), Palo Alto

County (Emmetsburg), O’Brien County (Sheldon), Benton County (Vinton), Des Moines County (Burlington), Johnson County (Iowa City), Bremer County (Tripoli), and Webster County (Fort Dodge).

The process used for the forums was the public deliberation model of the National Issues Forums as developed by the Kettering Foundation. This approach outlines three to four broad approaches for addressing a public issue, followed by participant discussion to analyze the approaches, identify common ground, and articulate any next steps.

An issue framing process with 20 people from across Iowa defined the policy question for the forums as: “What, if anything, should our community do in support of entrepreneurs and business startups?”

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The three approaches identified for forum discussions were:

### ***Approach 1. Self-Help Entrepreneurship:***

Entrepreneurship should emerge from independent initiative with little public involvement. The ability to identify opportunity, to be creative, and to manage risks matters most.

### ***Approach 2. Coordinating Community Assets to Build Entrepreneurial Initiatives:***

Community assets, resources, and support matter! The community should be an instrument for fostering more entrepreneurship and increasing the odds for business success.

### ***Approach 3. Building Connections, Strategic Networks and Regional Linkages:***

Connections and networks matter! Local entrepreneurs and support networks need to focus on linkages to expertise, resources, alliances, and markets available outside the community.

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## ***The Participants***

There were 285 people who participated in the 10 community forums. The participants were predominately white, although minorities were represented at some forums. There was a higher percentage of men than women, although many women also attended. Reflecting Iowa demographics a majority of participants were over 40 years of age, however younger participants were represented at most sites. Local participants generally included economic development professionals, entrepreneurs, local government officials, business people, lenders, farmers, area small business service providers, and private citizens. At most forums, people from several communities attended drawing from the county and adjacent multi-county area.

## ***Participant Survey Results***

Forum participants were asked to complete a questionnaire both immediately before and right after the community conversations. While the questionnaire results do not represent a scientific random sample, they do represent a self-selected sample of people who are interested enough in the entrepreneurship topic to attend a public meeting and express their ideas. Of the total 285 participants, 187 (65 percent) submitted questionnaires for inclusion in this analysis.

- Of the total respondents, 60 (32 percent) were currently involved in a start-up business, 36 (19 percent) reported thinking about starting a business, and 59 (32 percent) provided training or services to entrepreneurs.
- Fifty-six percent of the survey respondents agreed that they knew residents in their community who had good ideas and were willing to start a business, 32 percent were not sure, and 12 percent disagreed.

- Forty-six percent of respondents disagreed that the greatest local barrier to successful entrepreneurship was lack of viable projects, 28 percent were not sure, and 26 percent agreed.
- Sixty-four percent of respondents agreed that the greatest local barrier to successful entrepreneurship was lack of seed capital, 20 percent were not sure, and 16 percent disagreed.
- Forty-eight percent of respondents agreed that entrepreneurial skill for managing new business was the greatest barrier to successful entrepreneurship, 28 percent were not sure, and 24 percent disagreed.

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Regarding participant attitudes on the three approaches for assisting entrepreneurs:

- Seventy-two percent of respondents disagreed with the notion that assisting entrepreneurs should solely be a private sector initiative without public sector involvement, 17 percent were not sure, and 11 percent agreed with this notion. The post-forum ballots showed little change.
- Eighty-eight percent of the respondents agreed with the notion that local government and private sector leaders should develop community partnerships to create entrepreneur development, business startup and seed capital programs, seven percent were not sure, and five percent disagreed. Post-forum ballots confirmed that 84 percent agreed, seven percent were not sure, and nine percent disagreed.
- Sixty-seven percent of the respondents agreed with the notion that entrepreneurial development should involve linking local entrepreneurs with regional expertise, strategic networks, regional development organizations and industry clusters that fit specific ventures, 26 percent were not sure, and seven percent disagreed. Post-forum ballots confirmed that 66 percent agreed, 18 percent were not sure, and 16 percent disagreed.

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## 20 Steps Toward Community Entrepreneurship

Below are 20 ideas that summarize many of the forum suggestions. Various communities and service providers are currently implementing several of the ideas.

1. Organize entrepreneur clubs, forums, and networking opportunities for entrepreneurs.
2. Create a task force to develop a directory about products and services produced by small startup businesses and entrepreneurs to help create consumer awareness and market demand for their products and services.
3. Create a task force to develop a directory of local entrepreneur support resources such as mentoring opportunities, local seed funds, or regional revolving loan funds.
4. Create and publicize a local point of contact so potential entrepreneurs know whom they can contact to learn about local resources, programs, expertise, assistance, and support.
5. Create steering committees/advisory boards to organize mentoring programs, small business development programs, chapters of the Senior Corps of Retired Executives (SCORE), and/or opportunities for entrepreneurs to interact with active business leaders.
6. Create steering committees/advisory boards to hire and train, or contract professionals to create enterprise facilitation, business doctor, business coaching, or mentoring programs. Examples mentioned: Sirolli Institute workshops, Small Business Development Centers (SBDC) advisory boards, and others.
7. Organize steering committees/advisory boards to create incubator facilities and hire a startup business development director to create a business incubator program. Six of ten forum sites either had or expressed interest in developing a business incubator program.
8. Create community foundations for attracting and channeling intergenerational wealth into seed funds, entrepreneurship development programs and endowments for entrepreneurs.
9. Use local volunteer assistance, AmeriCorps, and Iowa Volunteer Service to organize small business and entrepreneur support programs.
10. Sponsor local entrepreneur short courses, schools, academies, institutes, and fairs.
11. Develop college intern programs to bring student entrepreneurs to communities. "Life in Iowa" program is start. Create community incentives to recruit entrepreneurs like doctors.
12. Create forgivable scholarship programs and/or provide more financial assistance to help young people start new businesses or take over existing business in target communities.
13. Use alumni groups to identify, invite and attract experienced former residents back home.
14. Create a statewide program to connect prospective entrepreneurs and business opportunities with business people nearing retirement (similar to young farmer programs).
15. Give some emphasis to youth, women, and new resident entrepreneurship development.
16. Use farm bill resources to stimulate entrepreneurial projects in rural community vitality, telecommunications, seed capital, value-added agriculture and renewable energy.
17. Encourage use of SBA and USDA loan guarantees and Small Business Innovation Research (SBIR) grants that can lead to feasibility study funds and government contracts.
18. Create a one-stop contact group of relevant agencies and entities (similar to housing) so entrepreneur project applicants don't waste time/resources in making multiple contacts.
19. Countywide and regional coalitions are important for developing collaboration opportunities, generating political support for small business development resources, and learning about enterprise synergies, innovations and experiences from other communities.
20. Community developers are more interested in regional opportunities for voluntary collaboration on projects when it makes sense—not mandatory regional consolidation.

# **Entrepreneurship and Community Vitality Forum Sites and Local Convenors**

## **Fairfield, Iowa - October 16, 2002**

Burt Chojnowski  
Ronald Bower

## **Corning, Iowa - October 28, 2002**

Chris Nelson  
Sue Basten  
Beth Waddle

## **Atlantic, Iowa - November 5, 2002**

Alan Teel  
Kate Johanssen

## **Emmetsburg Iowa - November 7, 2002**

George Hammond  
Jane Goeken  
Tom Alger  
Clark Marshall

## **Sheldon, Iowa – November 18, 2002**

Terry Janssen  
Jane Goeken  
Clark Marshall

## **Vinton, Iowa – November 19, 2002**

Linda Fischer  
Becky Stainbrook  
Renae Tharp

## **Burlington, Iowa – November 21, 2002**

Don Buzzingham

## **Iowa City, Iowa – November 25, 2002**

Jan Garkey  
Jeff Zakarakis-Jutz  
Ruth Allison

## **Tripoli, Iowa – November 26, 2002**

Darren Siefken

## **Fort Dodge, Iowa – December 5, 2002**

Jim Patton  
Mike McCarville



Photo courtesy of ISU Extension

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