

The Truth - Local News

Program teaches Amish business

Classes focus on modern methods

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NAPPANEE -- The quaint Amish businesses that dot the county roads and farm fields of southern Elkhart County could be a sleeping economic giant.

To nudge that giant awake, officials from around the county are launching a program to educate Nappanee-area Amish business owners and to help market their products.

"It's unique," Larry Andrews, executive director of the Nappanee Community and Economic Development Office, said of the program. "Oftentimes you don't hear Amish economic development in the same sentence."

The framework for the cottage industry and agri-tourism development program was created through informal meetings with Amish businessmen. A \$90,400 grant from the Indiana Office of Rural Affairs, along with a \$5,000 grant from the Elkhart County Community Foundation, transformed the program from an idea to a reality.

The program and grant were unveiled Friday afternoon at a press conference in the Buggy Crossing Antique Building in downtown Nappanee. The Elkhart County Convention and Visitors Bureau, the Nappanee Community and Economic Development Office, the Elkhart County Economic Development Corporation and the Learning Generation Initiative were credited with helping develop the program.

The main feature of the initiative will be a series of business classes, geared especially to the Amish. While the Amish bring to their businesses an old-fashioned work ethic as well as attention to quality and have access to ample family labor, many lack the knowledge of modern day financing, marketing and governmental regulations

Increasingly this is knowledge the Amish community needs. The horses and buggies, simple clothes and quiet demeanors belie the subtle shift going on in the Amish way of life.

Citing a series of statistics, Steve Nolt, an associate professor of history at Goshen College who has studied the Amish community extensively, said for the past 30 years, the Amish have been moving out of farm fields and into factories for their economic livelihood. In 1993 in northern Indiana, 12 percent of Amish men younger than 65 were full-time farmers but by 2001, that number had dwindled to 8 percent.

While within the Amish community the number of full-time farmers is falling, the number of small-business owners is climbing. Just 10 percent of the local Amish owned a small business in 1993 but today 25 percent are business owners.

"Amish people are finding the smaller, home-based businesses are better suited to their culture and their cultural values," Nolt said.

The new program was designed with heavy input from the Amish community. Mike Huber of the Elkhart County Convention and Visitors Bureau said the Amish have been "involved up front so we are clear on the best way to meet their needs."

The goal is for the program to become self-sustaining and to serve as a model for other communities. Most of the grant money, said Huber, will be spent on research to measure the potential market for Amish products and to determine the feasibility of establishing a revolving loan fund for those businesses.

Sitting on an Amish-made bench and eating homemade ice cream at Friday's announcement, Nappanee Mayor Larry Thompson sees the growth of Amish businesses as fitting into the town's plans for development.

Already a stop for owners of recreational vehicles, the Amish shops may draw more tourists to Nappanee who stay for several nights instead of just one.

During their visit, Thompson said he wants tourists to be entertained, feel welcome and safe, and spend a lot of money.

"There's a cottage shop on every road in Nappanee," Thompson said. "We want to be a destination."

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