

BEST BET



A public/private partnership aims to generate Sonoma County job growth.

By Katherine Alvarez

Just as no man is an island, no local community exists independent of its neighbors. That's the theory behind Sonoma County's Building Economic Success Together (BEST), a new program developed to create jobs and economic growth throughout the county.

Initially proposed by Santa Rosa Chamber of Commerce president/CEO Jonathan Coe, who'd been involved with similar programs in the past, BEST brings together leaders from throughout Sonoma County, from both the private and public sectors, with the definitive goal of creating 2,570 direct jobs and 4,100 total jobs in five years. BEST expects the new jobs to generate an estimated payroll of \$268 million and support personal consumption expenditures of

\$155 million over the program's initial five-year period. BEST can be extended for additional five-year time periods if it proves successful.

"It will be a countywide effort to grow our economy and create jobs. That's the bottom line of what it's about," says Coe.

The first phase of the project is to raise \$3.25 million and, so far, the capital campaign has raised more than \$2.6 million, or 80 percent of its goal. "We're well on our way to getting the funding committed and raised," says Randy DeCaminada, PG&E executive manager, North Coast, and general co-chair of the BEST program.

A search for an executive director to lead the effort is underway, and the program is now getting boots on the ground.



Left to right: Kevin Smith, Rolf Nelson, Juan Estrada, Dr. Robert Agrella, Randy DeCaminada, Shirlee Zane, Carl Campbell, Bobbi Beehler, Franklin (Trip) Snelson, Jennifer LeBrett, Jonathan Coe
[Duncan Garrett: Photography]

Community support from the start

Although the Santa Rosa Chamber of Commerce has been its facilitator and the program grew out of a retreat held by the chamber board about a year and a half ago, BEST is meant to be a countywide effort as it gets up and running. “It became clear that the greatest challenge—and the most important task we could take on—is one of moving our community and our county out of the recession and, even more important, creating jobs for the people of Sonoma County,” says Coe.

Following the retreat, Coe sought out other communities nationwide with successful job creation programs. “What we then did was to look at those communities and ask, ‘How did they do it? What were they doing? What kind of programs worked well for them?’” says Coe. “And what emerged pretty universally was this whole notion of creating a partnership between the private and public sectors, jointly funded over a multi-year period, that would assist private sector businesses in creating jobs with a particular emphasis on those companies that create wealth by making something—whether it’s a widget, a bottle of wine or a piece of computer code—that they sell somewhere else.”

After reviewing existing programs, Coe sat down with chamber members and other business organizations to put together the

the BEST Support Council.

Most notably, this past May, the Sonoma County Board of Supervisors approved a \$100,000 annual contribution commitment, funded from the transit occupancy tax (TOT). The investment carries a three-year commitment with a two-year renewal option, for a total potential value of \$500,000. Third district supervisor Shirlee Zane, campaign general co-chair of BEST with DeCaminada, spearheaded the county funding.

“I think local government has to play a part in creating a healthy economy. That’s why I stepped up to the plate, took on this leadership role and championed the contract with the county. I think we’re going to be successful. We have a lot of buy-in from strong business leaders,” says Zane. Business leaders on the campaign committee include DeCaminada, Brett Martinez of Redwood Credit Union, Marcus Benedetti of Clover Stornetta and Ty Pforsich of Moss Adams, among others.

Program leaders are in the process of meeting with city leaders in hopes of bringing them on board. The response so far has been positive, although budgets are tight for cities just as they are in the private sector, says Coe. “The partnership idea is what I think people really like,” he says.

“People feel like this is absolutely the time for Sonoma County folks to come together to create jobs.”

—Jonathan Coe, Santa Rosa Chamber of Commerce

first draft of a potential plan. The chamber hired Florida company Stellar Fundraising Executives Inc. to conduct a feasibility study, which included interviews with some 60 government and business leaders in the community. They then returned to those leaders with a potential plan and asked for support.

“We got a very positive response throughout the community,” says Coe. “People feel like this is absolutely the time for Sonoma County folks to come together to create jobs. This recession has been very difficult—more difficult here than a lot of other places. Although it’s very hard to come up with additional resources to put toward this kind of thing, now is absolutely the time to invest in the future.”

Crossing jurisdictions

Integral to the success of BEST is its countywide reach, as well as the bringing together of a private/public partnership including both government leaders and the business community. Recognizing that the economic success of each town influences the prosperity of nearby communities, the BEST board is reaching across city borders for support.

“I recommended to Jonathan that we couldn’t be just a ‘Santa Rosa Chamber-driven’ initiative, because it won’t work here. BEST is a broad-based effort; we have everybody from all over the county really involved in this—and not only as investors,” says DeCaminada.

Support comes from more than 50 businesses representing a wide range of industries—from banks and professional services providers to manufacturers, construction companies and the hospitality industry. On the public sector side, Santa Rosa Junior College, Sonoma State University, North Bay Leadership Council, United Way of the Wine Country and all Sonoma County chambers of commerce, among others, are members of

Plan components

“BEST is aimed at creating jobs by helping businesses, creating a great workforce and creating a positive environment in which to do business,” says Coe. It has five strategic initiatives, which include: business retention and expansion; create a strong, vibrant and supportive business climate; foster innovative businesses; attract new businesses providing high-quality jobs; and build a world-class workforce based on educational attainment. BEST will pursue all five initiatives concurrently.

“The reality is, they’re five separate initiatives that will require different tactical actions, but they’re symbiotic in nature when implemented together,” says Franklin (Trip) Snelson, BEST campaign executive and a consultant for Stellar Fundraising Executives, Inc.

Rohnert Park—and the county as a whole—experienced a big blow when State Farm closed its Rohnert Park facility and moved those operations to Bakersfield. BEST wants to prevent similar job losses in the future.

“Our objective is to find out what’s going on—and not through an exit interview,” says Snelson. “We want to proactively understand the needs, opportunities and challenges of the businesses here and try to use our resources to help them solve their problems and grow, and get our economy back on track.”

Interviews with companies will provide information to identify business needs and guide the program as it assists local businesses with growth. Connecting businesses with expansion funding options, as well as training and education (including for second-stage businesses), are part of the plan. “We’re working with them to identify the challenges and/or opportunities that are in front of them and helping work through those to ensure they can, in fact, grow and add new employees. That’s the easiest place to start—companies that are already in place and looking to expand,” says Snelson.

"I think local government has to play a part in creating a healthy economy."

—Shirlee Zane, Sonoma County Board of Supervisors

Additionally, BEST looks to recruit established outside companies. Single- or limited-ownership companies with 25 to 100 employees that pay above-average wages and provide benefits are first on BEST's target list.

Expect BEST to first seek out companies that mesh well with existing Sonoma County industries, including those in the green technology and green building industries, the wine industry, value-added food products, medical devices and high tech. Companies that supply or support the medical device or wine industries are also on the program's radar.

"We'll be seeking companies that fit well with those that are already here and that could supply or complement them. That's the most appropriate starting point," says Coe.

A Berkeley company that manufactures devices used in the transmission of solar energy is a good example of a potential target, explains Zane. The company sells more product in Sonoma County than anywhere else, yet maintains its headquarters elsewhere. BEST could approach the company and offer to assist in its relocation, emphasizing the benefits of living in this area and the perks and assistance BEST can provide.

The program will be geographically diverse in its search, and companies in other regions of the country that may have West Coast expansion needs will certainly be on the contact list. An organization similar to BEST recently recruited Santa Rosa-based Amy's Kitchen and helped facilitate its new East Coast production facility in Greenville, S.C., says Coe. "We'll be doing the same kind of thing."

That out-of-state expansion plan of Amy's Kitchen still eats at Supervisor Zane, and she hopes BEST will be able to prevent any similar moves by other leading Sonoma County employers.

"I talked to Andy [Berliner, founder and CEO of Amy's Kitchen] a couple of years ago, and he was looking to expand," says Zane. "He was very open, I think, to expanding here in Santa Rosa, but Greenville really reached out and made him an offer he couldn't refuse. If we'd had a BEST program, we could have competed and done the same type of outreach."

In addition to recruiting new businesses and expanding existing ones, the BEST plan

calls for fostering the success of innovative local businesses that are still in the startup phase. The failure rate for new businesses is extremely high, and BEST hopes to reverse that by working with young companies that operate from kitchen tables or out of garages and helping them with needed capital, advice and commercial space. "Whatever it takes to help," says Coe.

Workforce education

One way BEST aims to make Sonoma County appeal to companies considering expansion or relocation is by ensuring access to quality employees. It will analyze existing workforce readiness programs in the county and develop skills training programs that target the needs of desired business clusters as well as existing businesses. "It's about ensuring we have the employees for those companies and providing training as appropriate," says Coe.

BEST representatives will be able to showcase the potential for fully or partially subsidized training available as part of a relocation package. Companies can be offered first-run opportunities and access to qualified employees through existing jobs programs, which could potentially result in relocation cost savings. Existing programs such as Sonoma County Workforce Investment Board (WIB), Sonoma County Job Link and English learning programs (such as the Santa Rosa Chamber's WHEEL program; see "A Path to Empowerment," Oct. 2010) will be key components of BEST's sales toolbox. It also hopes to work closely with local high schools, Santa Rosa Junior College and Sonoma State University. "We want to connect the needs of our business community more closely with the local educational resources," explains Snelson.

On the flip side, BEST adds value to programs like Job Link and the WIB by providing opportunities generated by BEST's sales process and pipeline, Snelson adds. "We hope that we can help focus the training and retraining dollars more toward specific opportunities with companies associated with the program," he explains.

The BEST project also comprises a plan to develop a supportive business climate that's conducive to growth, says Coe. It includes a public relations campaign to create a positive environment where businesses can operate. The campaign

includes producing informational material about the importance of a strong business and economic environment. BEST will also actively advocate for initiatives that support job creation and for state and federal funding for infrastructure projects. "In the regulatory environment, we want to make sure the companies are able to work through the process of expanding their facilities easily and quickly," says Coe.

Not a copycat program

Differentiating BEST from other local economic growth and jobs programs is integral to garnering support for the program, but working in conjunction with existing efforts will fuel its success.

"We already have a lot of efforts going on here in the county in terms of jobs," says Zane. Job Link aims to train recently unemployed people and get them back on their feet, and the Economic Development Board has its Innovation Council. One of the Innovation Council's initiatives involves intensive interviews and focus groups on what small businesses need to grow to become mid-sized businesses, says Zane. "What we really don't have is an entity that functions like a conduit and brings these different efforts together in terms of collaboration. The BEST program is very much needed in that sense."

Snelson agrees that BEST will augment existing programs. "BEST doesn't duplicate any of their work. We dovetail with the work of the Economic Development Board, the Workforce Investment Board and the Innovation Council. We're the doers. The EDB generates the data. We're acting on recommendations from the Innovation Council. The WIB has job training resources. We're not going to be redundant to any of those activities, but all of those activities dovetail into what we're trying to do with job creation," he says. ■

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REPRINT
from September 2011
Pages 26-30

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