



2017



Amherst County, VA

Certified Entrepreneurial Community<sup>®</sup> Program

2017 CEC<sup>®</sup> FINAL REPORT

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## The Amherst County CEC® Leadership Team

The CEC® Leadership Team includes professionals, leaders, and entrepreneurs who are involved in driving the entrepreneurial ecosystem of the community. All participating members of the Leadership Team are expected to attend most of the meetings and CEC® related events within their community. Members provide valuable input into the development of entrepreneurial initiatives, lead tasks, and provide direction for the CEC® initiative. The Chair of the project assists the CEC® Project Team Leader in all event scheduling, action plan support, and project management.

The Economic Development Authority of Amherst County was the lead agency for the CEC® program and has integrated entrepreneurship priorities into its Economic Development Strategic Plan.



The Amherst County Leadership team included individuals from county government, small business community, and resource provider network. The individuals are listed alphabetically here.

- Peter Bryan, entrepreneur
- Derin Foor, entrepreneur
- Victoria Hanson, Amherst County Economic Development
- Nathan Kolb, Small Business Development Center
- Craig Maddox, Amherst County Schools
- Tom Rogers, Sweet Briar College, and entrepreneur
- Mike Russell, Virginia Small Business Supplier Diversity
- Lori Saunders, Amherst County Economic Development, Chair
- Jason Sharpe, entrepreneur
- Rebecca Sturm-Clauser, Retail Merchants Association, task leader
- Gloria Witt, entrepreneur, task leader
- Jenny Woollett, entrepreneur

## The CEC® Program Consulting Team

The CEC® Program is a joint venture between Creative Economic Development Consulting, Innovative Economies, and Entrepreneurial Places. Our three firms collaborated to develop and launch the redesigned CEC® program.

Each CEC® community is assigned a Project Team Leader. That leader is responsible for facilitating the action plan development, monitoring the score card, and coaching task team leaders. The Amherst County Project Team Leader was Leslie Scott. The Amherst County participants were:

Leslie Scott, Founder of Entrepreneurial Places, LLC

Crystal Morphis, Founder of Creative Economic Development Consulting, LLC



Leslie Scott



Crystal Morphis

## Overview of the CEC® Program

The Certified Entrepreneurial Community (CEC®) program is an economic development strategy that equips communities to become entrepreneur-ready. The designation means every door leads to opportunity. The overall business climate, leadership, policies, and resources to grow are simple to find and access. It also indicates there's an enthusiastic attitude and growth-oriented outlook driving the local business culture.

The CEC® program was created in 2007 by AdvantageWest, a regional economic development organization in North Carolina. Over the course of seven years, AdvantageWest certified ten communities. The program won several national innovation awards for the work it pioneered in entrepreneurship. In 2015 when AdvantageWest was closing, Creative EDC purchased the CEC® program, retooled and relaunched it. We streamlined the program making it more responsive to community needs.

In the first year, the CEC® program includes an Ecosystem Assessment, Action Plan, Score Card, Coaching, and Certification. The Ecosystem Assessment provides a baseline of research on the local entrepreneurial ecosystem. The Action Plan and Score Card used to measure progress is developed by the local leadership team in a facilitated workshop. Two task teams work on the Action Plan with coaching support by CEC® staff. Certification is awarded after local task teams accomplish their goals on two entrepreneur initiatives. We conclude the process by developing an Action Plan for year two, followed by additional coaching support.

Through our facilitation and beyond, certified communities make a commitment to ongoing action planning and implementation of entrepreneur initiatives. A Certified Entrepreneurial Community® signifies this is a place where entrepreneurs succeed.



## Entrepreneurship in Amherst County: A Snapshot

Amherst County is in the Commonwealth of Virginia, between Lynchburg and Charlottesville, along the scenic four-lane U.S. Highway 29. Amherst County's population is 32,000. Median household income is \$47,558. Amherst County is home to Sweet Briar College, and is a midpoint between two larger college towns. Amherst County already had mountain scenery, education assets, small business base, and proactive Economic Development Authority going into the CEC® process. The county has approximately 1,050 business establishments; 82% have 1-9 employees, and 71% are headquartered in Amherst County. The county economic development authority has also been successful in recruiting larger industry.

Amherst County officially launched the pursuit of the Certified Entrepreneurial Community® Program in October 2016 with a community retreat on entrepreneurship at Sweet Briar College. Over the course of the next 14 months, the CEC® Leadership Team, with the active support of community leaders, entrepreneurs, and *ad hoc* advisors, tackled the ambitious journey of creating a more “entrepreneur friendly” community.

From the earliest days of the CEC® Program, it became evident that Amherst County was equipped with entrepreneurs willing to lead and engage others in the business community to work closely with public and nonprofit agencies. As one of the greatest assets to any region wishing to advance small business opportunity, a culture of teamwork can often be the strongest indication of future success. Leveraging this foundation of positive relationships between government, entrepreneurs, non-profits, educational institutions, and regional agencies has allowed the CEC® Leadership Team to make significant strides in advancing the entrepreneurial ecosystem of Amherst County. Local entrepreneurs now say there is a buzz about Amherst County as a business location and a greater sense of public and private sectors working together.

At their first retreat and in a survey shortly afterward, the Amherst County Leadership Team identified the following key strengths and challenges for the county's entrepreneurship efforts.

### **Amherst County Strengths:**

- 1) Strong commitment from county government to support and grow the local business community
- 2) Committed partners from Central Virginia Community College, Sweet Briar College, and Amherst County Schools
- 3) Small Business Development Center and incubators in Lynchburg
- 4) Hundreds of home-based and trades businesses in Amherst County
- 5) Great location on the U.S. Highway 29 corridor
- 6) The Blue Ridge Mountains, national forests, and rivers for tourism and recreation

### **Amherst County Challenges:**

- 1) Leverage Lynchburg and Virginia's resources for training, one-on-one counseling, young adult networking, and business capital
- 2) Develop a buy-local campaign, technical assistance to existing businesses, and business cross-promotion to cut the leakage of retail and tourism dollars outside the county
- 3) Identify supplier needs of manufacturers and other large employers in Amherst County and prepare local firms to compete for those contracts
- 4) Increase appeal and opportunities for young adults

After the retreat, the consulting team surveyed the participants to get more detailed individual feedback. One of the questions asked was why business owners located in Amherst County. These were the factors that came up the most often:

- Location on corridor between Lynchburg and Charlottesville: good for tourism and recreation, Millennials
- Open door environment
- Helpful economic development agency

## CEC® Community Vision & Goals

**Vision:** Create a community culture that serves as a magnet and a support system for people starting and growing businesses

**Goals:**

- 1: Develop events for entrepreneurs in Amherst County to learn, connect, and grow
- 2: Assist local business people to find and leverage the business resources that serve Amherst County

## CEC® Entrepreneurial Growth & Retention Plan

**Mission:** To work with local and regional partners to make Amherst County a place where entrepreneurs visibly succeed at starting, growing, and relocating business ventures.

**Goals:**

**1. Connect and Inform**

Local events, networking opportunities, and seminars aimed at building informed relationships among Entrepreneurs, Customers, Service Providers, Capital Providers, and Community Leaders

**2. Streamline**

Reduce transactions costs for businesses to find the information and resources they need to be in line with county government requirements. Make the entrepreneurial process more transparent and efficient. Help businesses at every stage find the resource people and organizations geared to their needs and opportunities.

# CEC® Resource Inventory and Ecosystem Assessment

## Resource Inventory

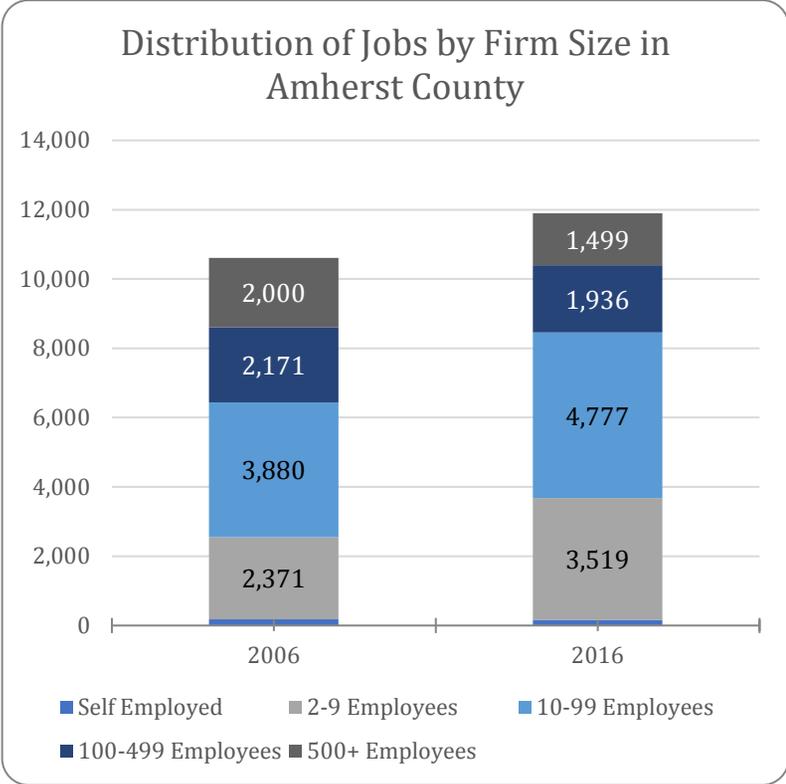
As part of the CEC® Program Launch, our team constructed a Resource Inventory outlining the various organizations that offer entrepreneurial tools, services, and support available to residents of Amherst County. The Inventory served as a foundational element for the entire CEC® process as the team prioritized resources and key partners in the local ecosystem.

The Inventory depicts the primary non-profit organizations and government agencies that offer resources to support entrepreneurship. The breakdown includes organizations on a federal, regional, state, and local level and is included in the Appendix. The “Resource Matrix” the CEC® team developed is a one-page document with the key resources used most often.

## Ecosystem Assessment

The Amherst County Certified Entrepreneurial Community® consulting team generated an Entrepreneurial Ecosystem Assessment through compilation of the quantitative and qualitative information gathered to establish baselines for local and regional entrepreneurship. A few highlights are as follows:

- In 2016 the county had nearly 5,000 jobs in “2nd stage” companies with 10-99 employees, and an additional 3,500 jobs in firms with 2-9 employees (see chart from YourEconomy.org).
- Many small firms are within the targeted industries from the Amherst County economic development strategic plan, including education, healthcare, retail and recreation, and manufacturing.
- According to Reference USA data, 44 firms in Amherst County are Advanced Industries, according to Brookings Institution 2015 definitions. Such firms rely on research and development and/or STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) workers and are highly correlated with local



economic growth.

- Amherst County has lower median incomes than Virginia overall and Lynchburg metro.
- Virginia's locally headquartered firms have grown more than outside firms. Amherst County has done better over the past decade with recruiting outside firms than growing local firms. However, the local base of firms has grown steadily over the past ten years as well. (Source: YourEconomy.org)

The entire Assessment can be found in the separate report entitled: Amherst County, VA Certified Entrepreneurial Community® Ecosystem Assessment.

## CEC® Action Plan

With the fresh insight and awareness available to the Leadership Team, they identified the two most important projects which needed to be tackled to grow the resource base for small business. Consideration was given to projects where significant progress could be made during the CEC® project timeline. The two projects selected for the CEC® Action Plan and resulting Scorecard were 1) build an inclusive entrepreneur network and 2) coordinate the promotion of business resources.

### Project # 1: Build an Inclusive Entrepreneur Network in Amherst County

#### Goals for Year 1:

- 1) Establish a shared leadership structure for the entrepreneur network, now called LINK.
- 2) Create a database of existing small businesses in Amherst County, pooling existing lists and expanding through sign-in sheets at all events.
- 3) Hold three events by and for entrepreneurs in Amherst County in different locations.

#### Goals for Year 2:

- 1) Continue to offer small events that address key topics of interest and showcase local businesses.
- 2) Engage resource providers in putting on and attending networking events.
- 3) Share resource matrix and other information with entrepreneurs who attend networking events.
- 4) Write success stories about Amherst County entrepreneurs.

## Project #2: Coordinate Promotion of Business Resources

### Goals for Year 1:

- 1) Catalog the most important business resources at local, regional, and state level.
- 2) Create a resource matrix that is housed at the Economic Development Authority of Amherst County and that all the partners can promote and distribute.

### Goals for Year 2:

- 1) Distribute the resource matrix to entrepreneurs who provide feedback on its utility.
- 2) Launch social media campaigns to drive traffic to the resource matrix and the LINK activities.

## CEC® Project #1: Entrepreneur Network

The key purposes of an entrepreneur network are to:

- 1) Welcome any business owner in any sector to content and networking opportunities
- 2) Showcase entrepreneurs already in Amherst County
- 3) Create dialog with resource providers and local government on business opportunities

When asked through a survey about the key elements of a good entrepreneur network, Amherst County leaders rated these items as very important or essential:

- ✓ Benchmark with other communities that have inclusive and vibrant entrepreneur networks (11)
- ✓ Create a database of everyone who attends and conduct a brief survey of their interests (10)
- ✓ Feature successful local entrepreneurs as speakers (10)
- ✓ Invite startups, existing businesses, and growth companies anywhere in the county (9)



*Networking event at Loose Shoe Brewery*

Key tasks the team identified to prepare for CEC® certification:

- 1) Establish a shared vision, leadership structure, and brand for the entrepreneur network
- 2) Hold three events by and for entrepreneurs in Amherst County, in different locations in the county

### 3) Create an evolving database of small businesses in Amherst County, offering sign-in sheets at events

At their first self-organized meeting, the project team created an organizing name and logo with the acronym LINK: Learn / Inform / Network / Knowledge.



A couple of the local entrepreneurs in Amherst County stepped up at the first retreat. They have been organizing an inclusive entrepreneur-hosted meetup series ever since.



They held the first event in Amherst (Feb. 8) with a former farmer who started a brewery telling his story (event picture on the previous page). The second event on the topic of marketing was held in Madison Heights on April 26th featured in the sidebar here. A third event was held in September but was not well attended. Plans are in the works to hold a future event at a local winery.

Amherst County High School is a full partner in building the LINK. Amherst County culinary students prepared the food for the first entrepreneur meet-up in February, and entrepreneurship and technology students made and distributed posters. Many communities overlook the importance of preparing the next generation for entrepreneurship. Amherst County realizes that the Career and Technical Education director from the high school is an essential partner in LINK, and therefore reached out to him from the start of the CEC® program.

### CEC® Project #2: Coordinate the Promotion of Business Resources

The Leadership Team wanted to offer something clear and simple to equip and educate the Amherst County business community on available resources. They used the CEC® Resource Inventory as one key starting point. They asked Service Providers to share research on the major issues businesses face, and they asked entrepreneurs to indicate their needs.

The **objectives for coordinated promotion of business resources** are:

- 1) To make the business startup process in Amherst County as clear and simple as possible
- 2) To give local business owners and startups a one-stop web page that directs them to relevant resources in the region
- 3) To build the brand for Amherst County as a business-friendly community

The team considered the following survey input on Promotion and Support. Leaders said these activities were essential or very important:

- ✓ Correct and expand the resource inventory to create a detailed menu of resources for small business. (11)
- ✓ Promote new and innovative companies in Amherst County in local and regional media. (10)
- ✓ Create a social media campaign through young adults about Amherst County as a place to live and start a business. (10)
- ✓ Create a coordinated and strong web presence to promote county and partners' resources to entrepreneurs internally and externally. (10)
- ✓ Start an informal network of business service providers that meets quarterly to coordinate event calendars, training, capital fairs, and referrals. (9)

The resource partners in the region – economic development, merchants' association, community college, Sweet Briar College, chamber, SBDC, community bank, etc. — met to coordinate their offerings and their primary output is a matrix of the priority resources for business startups and small businesses as shown on the next page.

They will update the links and contact information and post the matrix on the Amherst County economic development website, while each partner creates links to it. The page <http://www.amherstvabusiness.com/first-steps/> is one of the places the link to the matrix is prominently featured. Each of the lead organizations will take responsibility for getting business owners and startups to the more specialized resources.

The planning and implementation of a web page geared to entrepreneurs, coupled with local mentors who can reduce transactions costs, will also strengthen Amherst County's culture of public-private collaboration in a visible way.



Mountains of Opportunity

*Amherst Wants Your Business!*

[www.amherstvabusiness.com](http://www.amherstvabusiness.com)

		Business Planning & Coaching	Sales/Marketing/Education	Access to Capital	Networking	Local/State/Federal Certifications & Registrations	Legislative Advocacy	Business Space
Amherst County Economic Development Authority	<a href="http://www.amherstvabusiness.com">www.amherstvabusiness.com</a> 434-946-5200		+		+		+	+
Amherst County Planning & Zoning	<a href="http://www.countyofamherst.com">www.countyofamherst.com</a> 434-946-9303					+		+
Amherst County Chamber of Commerce*	<a href="http://www.amherstvachamber.com">www.amherstvachamber.com</a> 434-946-0990				+		+	
Amherst County Tourism	<a href="http://www.visitamherstcounty.org">www.visitamherstcounty.org</a> 434-946-0990		+		+			
Town of Amherst, VA	<a href="http://www.amherstva.gov">www.amherstva.gov</a> 434-946-7885					+	+	+
Business OneStop	<a href="http://www.bos.virginia.gov">www.bos.virginia.gov</a> 804-786-6585	+	+	+		+		
Lynchburg Business Development Center	<a href="http://www.lbdc.com">www.lbdc.com</a> 434-582-6100	+		+				+
Lynchburg Regional Business Alliance*	<a href="http://www.lynchburgregion.org">www.lynchburgregion.org</a> 434-845-5966	+			+		+	
Retail Merchants Association*	<a href="http://www.lynchburgrma.com">www.lynchburgrma.com</a> 434-528-1732	+	+		+		+	
SCORE –The Greater Lynchburg Chapter	<a href="http://www.lynchburgscore.org">www.lynchburgscore.org</a> 434-582-4560	+						
Small Business Development Center (SBDC)	<a href="http://www.sbdc.cvvc.org">www.sbdc.cvvc.org</a> 434-832-7295	+	+	+				
SourceLink Virginia	<a href="http://www.sourcelinkva.org">www.sourcelinkva.org</a> 804-527-4247		+			+		

*\*Membership organization*

## Summary of Progress

As of November 2017, the Amherst County CEC® Leadership Team has accomplished the following milestones:

Activity, Project 1	Outcome
Created a brand for an entrepreneur network	Learn – Inform –Network – Knowledge (LINK) is the new name and has a logo with Amherst County at its center
Met monthly and then bi-weekly to plan events	Demonstrated volunteer commitment of local business owners
Conducted outreach to entrepreneurs countywide and held three events: February, April, and September 2017	Local businesses receive exposure at the events and met resource providers and potential business mentors. High school students learned about the local business community.
Activity, Project 2	Outcome
Considered the consulting team’s initial resource inventory	Raised awareness of the regional and state resources for business owners
Designed the look and content of the local resource matrix	Created shared ownership of the site between economic development and partners
Launch of resource matrix in Fall 2017	Economic Development will promote the site at events and takes the lead on upkeep

<b>Goal #1 – Inclusive and Educational Entrepreneur Network</b>				
<b>Activities</b> <i>Steps taken</i>	<b>Outputs</b> <i>What activities produce</i>	<b>Commitments</b> <i>Indicators of support</i>	<b>Outcomes</b> <i>What is changing</i>	<b>Indicators of Systemic Change</b> <i>Long-term changes</i>
-Create a brand for the local network -Choose dates, speakers, and topics -Promote events countywide	- LINK: Learn / Info/ Network/ Knowledge and logo with county in it -Entrepreneur events in February, April, and September 2017	-Entrepreneurs organize and host three networking events -Public schools provide student volunteers for developing and distributing promotional flyers	- Community sees local government as business-friendly -Entrepreneurs in any sector feel welcome at events	Entrepreneurs create business to business opportunities and reduce retail and service leakage
<b>Goal #2 – Coordinated Promotion of Business Resources</b>				
<b>Activities</b> <i>Steps taken</i>	<b>Outputs</b> <i>What activities produce</i>	<b>Commitments</b> <i>Indicators of support</i>	<b>Outcomes</b> <i>What is changing</i>	<b>Indicators of Systemic Change</b> <i>Long-term changes</i>
-Identify most prevalent needs at each business stage -Create priority resource list	-Resource matrix of resources for businesses in Amherst County, keyed by type of service provided and whether it is a membership organization	- Economic Development offers its website as gateway -SBDC brings program staff to train on business topics -Local entrepreneurs volunteer as mentors	-Greater awareness of local business resources and leadership -Recognition that web page alone cannot change culture	Shared responsibility for the local business climate among county, educational institutions, entrepreneurs, and nonprofit agencies

*Organized according to the Hierarchy of Community Impacts developed by the Heartland Center for Leadership Development*

## Testimonials

“As a new small business owner in Amherst County, I floundered for a while because I wasn't fully aware of what resources were available to me. As the year progressed, being able to meet with the other business owners in my community allowed me to get a better understanding of how things worked within the county. The resource matrix also enabled me to find resources quickly. I am fully confident that any other entrepreneurs coming into the county will find these as beneficial as I have. I feel that being a Certified Entrepreneurial Community® will also prompt more small businesses to come to Amherst County which will increase our tax base and allow us to grow as a community.” *Diana Rider, Lillie Pad Creations*

“The challenges in starting a business are plentiful, regardless of the size. A streamlined approach to navigating an area's zoning laws, available resources, and educational opportunities are essential to the success of the business community. The Certified Entrepreneurial Community® program does this and more, and will help provide the environment necessary for growth.” *Derin Foor, Loose Shoe Brewing Company*

“Small town businesses play an important role in the economy of small towns and become the backbone of local economic growth. An entrepreneur believes in improving the quality of life not only for themselves, but also for their community. The support of the local and regional agencies can certainly affect the success of an entrepreneur starting up. Amherst County provides opportunities on multiple levels for individuals to become business owners. Through the CEC® program we have streamlined the process for the individual with a business idea to put their visions into action. The team's promotion of local businesses also helps them secure more customers from the entire community.” *Rebecca Sturm-Clauser, Retail Merchants Association*

## Conclusion

The work completed in Amherst County during the CEC® Program has already created significant momentum within the community. The public-private collaborative efforts of the Leadership Team are impressive when compared to the initiatives tackled in communities of similar size. Amherst County is the very first community in Virginia to be certified as an entrepreneurial community.

A key asset in Amherst County is an economic development organization with a leadership focus on entrepreneurship and small business development. Its staff members are excited about the trust and transparency that is developing through the CEC® process with local business owners as they discuss their challenges and what they want from the community.

As the community leaders continue to drive LINK, which combines entrepreneur outreach, training, and networking, we expect them to foster the crucial connections needed to truly create a “No Wrong Door” culture within Amherst County.

The mechanisms continue to be built to measure the overall impact of their work and benchmark the efficacy of this initiative. The Certified Entrepreneurial Community® Program Project Team Leaders are proud of the accomplishments already achieved in Amherst County and are honored that they are our newest addition to the CEC® family.