

Rural Entrepreneurship

By Gil Mathew, President/CEO
Nevada County Economic Resource Council

Rural entrepreneurship is distinguished from urban primarily by factors of isolation and the inability to attract companies for lack of infrastructure. Witness the story of Tupelo, Mississippi as reported in a newsletter from the Center for Rural Entrepreneurship.

Tupelo is often referred to as a "miracle" because the poorest county in the U.S. in 1940 became the second wealthiest county in Mississippi in the 1990s. The Tupelo story is one of capacity building. In the 1930s, Tupelo and Lee County had no competitive advantage – the agricultural base was in decline, and the industrial base was almost nonexistent. Physical infrastructure was limited; the town and county were isolated; the population was primarily illiterate. Through the leadership of a civic entrepreneur, George McLean, Tupelo embarked on a different approach to economic development. Rejecting strategies that focused on luring companies with offers of cheap, unskilled labor and incentives, town leaders focused on developing the human resources in the region as the basis for economic development. They argued that a strong community leads to a strong economy.

A number of principles guided the development process and these are relevant to other communities:

- People in the community must be responsible for addressing local problems, and developing this human resource is the first step.
- Leadership is important, but you also have to develop the organizations and institutions that will implement the development strategy.
- The development process must be both local and regional to achieve its fullest impact.
- Any development process must have broad-based participation by all members of the community, starting with the poorest.
- Communities must build on their assets; the most important are people.

The evolution of Tupelo included such initiatives as the creation of rural development councils to bring programs to the rural parts of the county, the development of incubators and worker training programs, and upgrading the education infrastructure through creation of a community college and the addition of a University of Mississippi campus in the region.

The Tupelo model is available to Nevada County, and the Economic Resource Council is committed to a process that uses these principles. Working with what we have rather than what we do not have and providing an atmosphere that encourages entrepreneurship may be just the tonic that assists in the exodus from these tough economic times. Is there a good idea out there that needs help? Give us a call!

(To reach the ERC, call 274-8455; for more on Tupelo read *Tupelo; The Evolution of a Community*, by Vaughn Grisham Jr. and published by the Kettering Foundation.)

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