

## **Pop Up Marion/Small Business Boot Camp**

The Town of Marion, in partnership with Marion Downtown!, the Virginia Main Street Program, the Virginia Department of Business Assistance, People Inc., The Chamber of Commerce of Smyth County, WOLD/WZVA Radio, and Wells Fargo Bank, offered a program to fill vacant storefronts in our historic downtown.

A certified Virginia Main Street Community since 1995, Marion was posting near record vacancies in the path of the Great Recession. Our office formulated a plan, and presented the idea to the Virginia Main Street Program for their consideration for an Economic Development Grant. After some discussion, the state program agreed to let Marion “test the waters”, and the results speak for themselves!

The program, “Pop Up Marion!”, combined the necessary elements of small business success – training, business plan development, ongoing mentorship, networking, and initial operating capital – in an exciting, vibrant, hands-on approach to rebuilding the local economy through entrepreneurship.

Following a community survey to engage the shoppers and to identify the specific needs in the market, the team offered its first-ever “Small Business Boot Camp”, where participants spent eight evenings in intensive, interactive classroom settings learning the basic skills of small business and developing a business plan that they presented to the class for graduation. From that graduation class, each of the businesses had an opportunity to win \$5,000 in startup capital, advertising credit, and ongoing mentorship – but there is a catch. The winning businesses had to also participate in special events, extended hour campaigns, and meet at least monthly with their business mentor to share the books, stories, struggles, and successes to keep everyone on track.

The project was kickstarted with the \$15,000 grant from Virginia Main Street, but quickly garnered regional attention. Representatives from Wells Fargo Bank asked to be able to join, and provided an additional \$5,000 grant. The radio stations provided \$1,000 advertising credit to each of the winning businesses, and promotional airtime to the contest.

The initial class drew 42 participants, packing Marion’s Town Council Chambers! At the end of the intensive “boot camp”, 11 entrepreneurs were ready and presented their plans. Others attended individual class modules to “brush up” on skills – we found that existing businesses were just as excited at the opportunity as new ones!

Two businesses won! “Rufflections Pet Grooming and Day Care” and “The Herb House Trading Company”. Both filled long-vacant downtown buildings. In fact, Tosha Harris, the owner of “Rufflections”, bought her building because of the program! Two other businesses, a clothing store and a music store, opened downtown specifically because of the consumer survey and the excitement, without the grant assistance! Eleven jobs are directly attributed to the first round of “Pop Up Marion”, and we’re beginning Round Five this week with another group of entrepreneurs set to graduate in March!

“Pop Up Marion” is a proven, exciting way to move our community through helping budding entrepreneurs and existing business owners learn the skills they need, study the emerging markets, and “grow” our local economy by fostering a climate of “Be The Change” where locals are

empowered to take charge of their destiny - and the destiny of the community – through small business.

**TOTALS (Through Round Four):**

# Attendees: 103

# Graduates: 31

# Buildings Sold: 4

# Storefronts filled: 8

# New Businesses: 13

# New Jobs: 62

# Indirect New Businesses: 7

# Indirect New Jobs: 15

**DOWNTOWN STOREFRONT VACANCY RATE: FROM 17.2% to 6.7%!!!!**