

## **Lower Looks at Successful Economic Development Council**

VILLAS – Chester County, Pa., has a number of high tech and manufacturing jobs but still worries about its youth moving away.

Closer to home, Lower Township has an underutilized airport industrial zone and is considering tax abatements for start-up businesses.

There are a number of similarities between Chester County and Lower Township in both opportunities and challenges, according to Marybeth DiVincenzo, Chester County Economic Development Council (CCEDC) senior vice president and chief marketing officer.

Similarities include a tilapia and an aquaponics program in Chester County and a start-up brewery made possible with economic assistance.

DiVincenzo spoke to a breakfast meeting of the Lower Township Economic Development Advisory Committee at the Saltwater Café earlier this month.

She oversees five industry partnerships, management of over \$20 million in federal, state and local grants and directing marketing efforts of the CCEDC. She said the mission of the council is to encourage smart economic growth.

Years ago, Chester County was fairly rural and focused on agriculture.

“Every time we would bring a business into our area the issue of how we were actually choosing to develop areas became the conversation,” said DiVincenzo. “We worked to do this in a smart way so that we were not breaking up our farms and tearing them down.”

The CCEDC is a private, not-for-profit, non-governmental agency started in 1960. Initially, the council offered site selection and financing for start-up businesses before expanding into workforce development, she said.

DiVincenzo said Chester County has over 17,000 individual businesses and 200,000 workers.

With an average household income of about \$81,000 and median house values of \$330,000 in Chester County, finding workforce housing has been a challenge, she said.

CCEDC has three industrial development authorities assisting in obtaining federal and state grants for companies and commercial loan and financing services. It also assists farmers to get bank loans.

DiVincenzo said the council handles \$15 million to \$20 million per year in grant management and support. Chester County has seen a shift from manufacturing to tech companies, she said.

The unemployment rate in Chester County is 6 percent compared to a 14 percent jobless rate in Cape May County.

“One of our other challenges is to keep kids in our area and to prepare them for high-tech jobs or advanced manufacturing,” said DiVincenzo. “Many leave the area.”

She said the council works with educators to make sure students make smart career choices including manufacturing and agriculture.

The council has state funds to incubate business in “Keystone Innovation Zones” which feature tax credits up to \$100,000, in particular, for tech start-up companies, she said.

DiVincenzo said Lower Township needs to determine what are its high-priority industries, those with the most jobs that pay family-sustaining wages. She advised business leaders to work together and “ignore the turf wars,” and take a regional approach.

“There’s plenty of business out there, find it and fill the gap,” she said.

Lower Township Deputy Mayor Norris Clark said there should be more emphasis on finding economic development grants that would benefit the township. He said business and education needed to intersect.

Lower Cape May Regional High School District Superintendent Christopher Kobik said the district had a number of programs that work with local businesses including graphic design, desktop publishing and webpage design.

“The school has continued to try to move ahead through federal grants and we work with our Workforce Investment Board in Atlantic City to try to develop our career and technical education programs but also our liberal arts programs,” he said.

Councilman Erik Simonsen, who is vice principal of the Richard M. Teitelman School, said the district has a 21<sup>st</sup> century life and careers curriculum concentrating on job skills and work-readiness training.

“It’s important for those students who may not want to go to college or special needs students who are capable of getting a good job in the workplace but may not be interested in furthering their education as far as college goes,” he said.

Simonsen said he is in favor of a business incubator program at the county airport using tax abatements.

The next meeting of the Lower Township Economic Development Advisory Committee will be held at Lower Cape May Regional High School, Jan. 13 at 8:30 a.m.