TCEDC is a community development center that empowers and equips entrepreneurs to move from the informal economy into the formal economy. More than just a small business incubator, TCEDC represents the dynamic process of matching real community needs to innovative opportunities.

How was TCEDC started?

In 1987, the community of Taos, New Mexico was facing a difficult reality. A large mine had recently closed, leaving many workers unemployed. While tourism remained an important industry, most service jobs were seasonal and did not pay well, and very little tourism revenue stayed in Taos County. Young people, finding little opportunity in their community, began to leave for other regions. Two local people groups have long histories and deep connections to Taos County: the Taos Pueblo have lived on and cultivated the land for over a thousand years, and a large Hispanic population has done the same for five hundred years. In the face of economic hardship, the sustainability of those communities was in danger.

Terrie Bad Hand and Pati Martinson had been working together at the Denver Indian Center, directing a Community Development Center there. The Taos Pueblo tribal government invited the two of them to move to Taos County to do similar work in that community. Despite a rough start due to changing tribal leadership, Terrie and Pati began a careful process of listening to community members in an effort to identify the needs and ideas that would give shape to their work.

The first step was to convert an old grocery store into a business incubator for local artisans and entrepreneurs. Providing physical space for these small businesses helped entrepreneurs avoid high startup and overhead costs. Most of the participating businesses were producing and selling jewelry, tinwork, woodwork and upholstered items. This concept engaged a portion of local entrepreneurs, but
as Terrie and Pati continued to listen to the community, they realized there was a significant additional need.

Terrie notes, “Input from the community had more to do with holding on to the land, the water, the culture, the food and those kinds of things. We began focusing on our food system and bringing back that which had been interrupted for so long.” Local food vendors were not in compliance with industry requirements, and were frequently shut down by health inspectors. One common problem was that food products for sale were not prepared in a commercial kitchen. The business incubator had no kitchen space, so plans were laid to build infrastructure to support food-based businesses. In 1995, after three years of fund-raising, a 24,000 square-foot building was built, equipped with a 5,000 square-foot commercial kitchen. At present, the kitchen space is the heart of TCEDC, and part of what makes it unique and innovative.

The Innovation: Empowering Entrepreneurs

For food entrepreneurs, access to a commercial kitchen is just one hurdle in the start-up process. There was also a dizzying array of licensing requirements, inspections, and standards to navigate. TCEDC offers a free week-long course to help new business owners understand and meet these requirements. In the 30-hour course, students learn about food processing, micro-biology, food safety, the history and culture of food in northern New Mexico, and basic small business and computer skills. Local inspectors and regulators help teach the course, and develop productive working relationships with emerging business owners. The class is offered twice each year, and although it has been offered for nearly twenty years, demand remains strong. Nearly 30 people are signed up for the next available class.

After completing the course, business owners have access to the kitchen, which is open twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. Members use the kitchen on the honor system – they are free to come and go based on their own schedule, and keep a log of their hourly use. The cost of use for the kitchen is $12 per hour. While this rate is well below the actual value of access to the facility, Terrie and Pati remain committed to ensuring access to all members of the community. “We don’t just do business,” Pati notes. “We’re also concerned about justice, which means that we’re committed to offering access to everybody. We want to pay attention to connections and relationships between people. We’re concerned about the health of our families and community.”

Participating businesses also have access to the TCEDC label, Oso Good Foods. Local grocery and health food stores have committed to stocking food items bearing the Oso Good Foods label, providing a ready market for food products. TCEDC continues to partner with food retailers to understand market demand, in an effort to inform and support emerging food entrepreneurs.
For several years, TCEDC also operated a mobile matanza, which travelled to rural farms and ranches to butcher meat animals. Farmers and ranchers are often unable to afford the high cost of shipping live animals to processing facilities, both in terms of trucking fees and stress on the animals during transit. In response to this need, the mobile matanza team, comprised of butchers and a USDA meat inspector, would travel up to 100 miles from Taos to harvest meat animals, then transport the meat back to a processing facility attached to the TCEDC building. Due to reduced funding in recent years, the mobile matanza has been temporarily shut down, but Pati and Terrie continue to look for ways to reopen this important service.

According to Pati and Terrie, the foundational first step in establishing an organization like TCEDC is to carefully listen for the real needs of the community. This requires patience and effort, as there is no substitute for taking the time to carefully listen to community members about what is important to them. Matching emerging projects to community needs is an ongoing process, as contextual factors
can impact and change those needs over time. For TCEDC, that has sometimes meant closing down older projects to make room for new ones. This openness to change and drive to match the mission of the organization to the needs of the community are central to the soul and success of TCEDC.

Securing adequate funding has always been a challenge that requires persistence and creativity. Terrie describes how for many years, TCEDC relied on a three-legged approach to funding: one-third of their funding came from federal or state funds, one-third came from private grants, and one-third came from rent paid by tenant businesses who were renting floor space at TCEDC. After the recession hit in 2008, public and private funding dried up, and TCEDC had to become more creative in their funding while also making difficult decisions about shuttering some of the services that had been offered, like the mobile matanza.

Despite the setbacks in their work at TCEDC, Terrie and Pati keep a sense of humor and perspective. They are happy to offer advice to those who might want to replicate what they've done at TCEDC. “Remember to adapt the mission of your work to your own community,” Pati insists. “Don’t just sit at a desk. Get out and rub shoulders with people. Then do something, even it’s small at first. You don’t have to engage the whole vision at once. Celebrate small rewards. And think sustainably – ask, what will have lasting impact?”

Contact

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