

Turning Fairfield, Iowa into a Rural Renaissance City

By Burt Chojnowski

THE POWER OF THE ENTREPRENEURIAL CLASS

A new paradigm of entrepreneurial development was developed in tiny Fairfield, Iowa and resulted in the creation of a rural renaissance city, teeming with more jobs than the folks who live there and creating an arts community as robust as cities 100 times its size. Fairfield is 60 miles from the nearest interstate and over 100 miles from the nearest metro. It started with the growth of the entrepreneurial class and the Fairfield Entrepreneurs Association as a next-generation economic development organization that taps into the collective wisdom of entrepreneurs. Once a culture of entrepreneurship was established in the city, it became self-perpetuating and spilled over into the social and civic fabric of the community.

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turning fairfield, iowa

INTO A RURAL RENAISSANCE CITY

By Burt Chojnowski

What is the value of the entrepreneurial class? Between 1980 and 2005, firms that were less than five years old created virtually all net new jobs created in the U.S. That was nearly 40 million jobs, according to Robert Litan, director of research at the Kauffman Foundation. Two thirds of all inventions come from entrepreneurs.

Thomas L. Friedman, author of *The World Is Flat* and *Flat, Hot and Crowded* and columnist for the *New York Times*, in an April 3, 2010 opinion-editorial said, “to bring down unemployment we need to create a big bushel of new companies - fast. Good-paying jobs don’t come from bailouts. They come from start-ups. And where do start-ups come from? Smart, creative, inspired risk-takers.”

The Secret to Job Growth: Think Small article by Edward L. Glaeser and William R. Kerr in the *Harvard Business Review* echoes the same theme. Their research shows that regional economic growth is highly correlated with the presence of many small, entrepreneurial employers – not a few big ones.

Over the last 150 years, community leaders came from the merchant class in rural communities. With the influence of big box stores and the demise of small town businesses, entrepreneurs assume the roles of civic leaders and philanthropists.

Are chambers of commerce or economic development organizations set up to support entrepreneurs? Not even close. Although an increasing number of economic developers have started embracing economic gardening strategies, especially for service and retail business, it is primarily an agency approach that doesn’t address the culture of entrepreneurship. Entrepreneurs require their own support ecosystem.

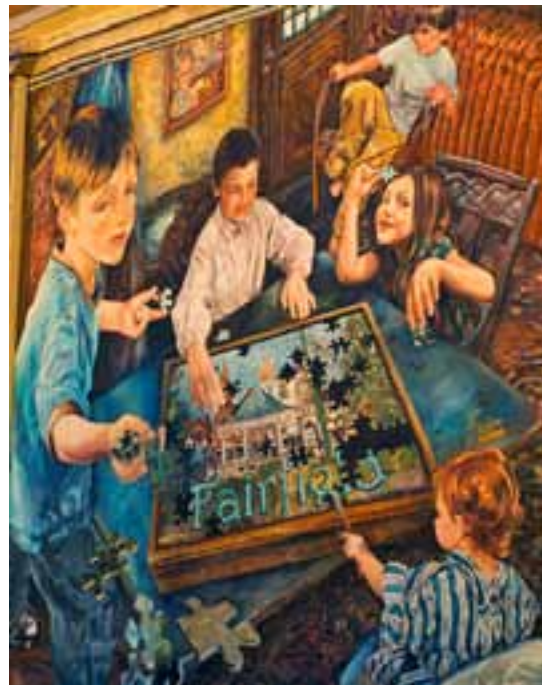


Photo Credit: Guy Haney

Fairfield Puzzle Mural

IT TAKES A VILLAGE TO SUPPORT AN ENTREPRENEUR

Where do we start with finding the coaches and mentors to nurture the skill sets 21st century entrepreneurs need? Ninety percent of what entrepreneurs learn, they learn from their peers or from their own experience, not from economic development professionals, books or in a classroom. Some of the most important skills that an entrepreneur requires are leadership, problem solving, understanding your metrics, how to boot strap, how to forge a team, and how to market to women. In short, they need to know how to *asset quilt* their way to success.

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THE POWER OF THE ENTREPRENEURIAL CLASS

A new paradigm of entrepreneurial development was developed in tiny Fairfield, Iowa and resulted in the creation of a rural renaissance city, teeming with more jobs than the folks who live there and creating an arts community as robust as cities 100 times its size. Fairfield is 60 miles from the nearest interstate and over 100 miles from the nearest metro. It started with the growth of the entrepreneurial class and the Fairfield Entrepreneurs Association as a next-generation economic development organization that taps into the collective wisdom of entrepreneurs. Once a culture of entrepreneurship was established in the city, it became self-perpetuating and spilled over into the social and civic fabric of the community.

Barn raising and quilting – these are nostalgic terms to describe common rural activities of communities and groups working together. Most of us know what these terms mean but likely have never been involved in either activity unless we lived in a rural community.

They describe the bootstrapping, collaborative culture of rural America in the 1800's as towns and communities grew up from nothing. But, they now have their place in the new millennium as rural communities and rural businesses fight to survive. We could describe the same processes in modern terms that describe the connected resources, layering, and the magic that come from creating a whole greater than the sum of the parts – something like open-source entrepreneurial development or virtual incubation – but they don't evoke the same emotional response as *asset quilting*.

Fairfield, Iowa (pop 9,400) has fostered a culture of civic entrepreneurship and asset quilting among entrepreneurs to create something new and bigger that is greater than the sum of the parts, both in the private and public sectors. It involves leveraging ideas, money, and resources through community-wide collaboration. The private sector bootstrapping and startup mentality has naturally carried over into the social and civic fabric of the community. *Asset quilting* describes the creativity and magic that drive this bell-weather community everyday. This article will provide some of the insights into Fairfield's secret sauce that created a modern renaissance and utopian community.

FAIRFIELD'S ASSET QUILTING

The quilt is a metaphor for the ways in which discarded scraps and fragments may be made into a unified, even beautiful, whole. Quilting symbolizes the process out of which the unimportant and meaningless may be transformed into the valued and useful.

- Individual assets and talents are represented by the individual pieces of cloth that make up the top layer of the quilt.
- The teamwork is represented by the batting (the material that is sewn in between the top and bottom layers of the quilt).
- The strategic level is represented by the backing (the bottom layer of the quilt).



Jim Belilove of Creative Edge – quilt squares for Iowa State Fair pavilion



Four Seasons Barn Quilt Square



Fairfield Welcome Sign

- The threads that connect all the pieces together represent the deeper networking, communications, and operational commitments that move any endeavor or organization forward.

When you understand the way a quilt is created, you can understand the way all the pieces, sections, and layers are interconnected and how to harness the culture of collaboration and innovation. It is akin to putting together puzzle pieces, but in many cases you might have to create or find many of the missing pieces.

Let's face it, most entrepreneurial ventures don't end up where they have intended to go. There are constant, sometimes daily revisions to the quilting strategy and the team. I think business plans are over-rated. An organization's asset quilting strategy is more important. It can nurture the creativity to be able to turn-on-a-dime or quickly capitalize on new market opportunities. Asset quilting generates innovation.

TOWN TURNED INCUBATOR: CREATING AN ENTREPRENEURIAL CLASS

In 2009, the Fairfield Entrepreneurs Association (FEA) celebrated its twentieth anniversary of economic gardening, the process of nurturing entrepreneurs and locally growing new businesses. As one of America's leading peer-to-peer networks, the FEA has helped create 4,000 new jobs and attract \$280 million in investment in startup companies. Fairfield's manufacturing and telecom sectors were hit hard over the last 20 years so the 4,000 new jobs helped replace a few thousand that were lost.

The Fairfield Entrepreneurs Association has created replicable entrepreneurship and incubator-development systems that communities around the country have started to replicate. FEA board members and mentors provide support for every type of entrepreneur, whether by holding a Biz Bounce for seed-stage businesses, promoting an entrepreneur relocation program, offering mentoring-networking programs for startups, providing micro-enterprise loans or hosting boot camps.

The virtual entrepreneurial support system in Fairfield leverages organic “economic gardening hot spots” by using established locales such as the Fairfield Public Library, local coffee shops, and bookstores as convenient, low-cost meeting spaces and resource centers. Virtually every restaurant in town becomes a business-networking hub at lunchtime. And this is a town with a lot of restaurants, more per capita than San Francisco.

The FEA has hosted several conferences on entrepreneurship and investment, including the first Iowa Rural Investment Conference, the 2004 Academy on Entrepreneurship, and numerous boot camps for entrepreneurs, foodpreneurs and “artpreneurs.” Fairfield has also been home to six National Entrepreneurial Gatherings, which have been co-sponsored by the Farm Foundation and Community Vitality Center; an Economic Gardening National Gathering; and several Economic Gardening Boot Camps.

The social and business networks in Fairfield are robust. It is commonplace to share resources, business contacts, and experiences. Fairfield has developed a culture of nurturing, supporting, and celebrating its entrepreneurial class because these entrepreneurs not only create jobs and wealth, they become the angel investors, role models, and mentors for successive entrepreneurial ventures.

When the Fairfield Entrepreneurs Association (FEA) started in 1989, the mission was to recognize and support the entrepreneurial class in Fairfield and make the case for economic gardening as an important economic development strategy. There were a lot of entrepreneurial starts, stops, and fizzles during the 1980’s as a result of the mass migration of 2,000 new residents from all over the country and the world who migrated to Fairfield in part to help create a 20th century utopian community. The enormous amount of trial and error yielded a wealth of experience about what worked and what didn’t.

The FEA created a grass roots support system to support entrepreneurial success, reduce the number of failures, and improve the financial literacy and entrepreneurial literacy of Fairfield entrepreneurs and residents, respectively. The natural social and business networks in the community were enhanced and entrepreneurs started networking. Is there “wisdom in the crowd” in a shared business network? We think so. This expression of a group’s creative intelligence is an intangible bonus of asset quilting.

One of the most important lessons learned was that business leaders acting in isolation, or arbitrarily, would often result in poor decisions. CEOs and company presidents need brutally honest advice from their peers at every stage of the process. Co-workers and spouses don’t have the same kind of leverage.

The entrepreneurial activity of the 1980’s represented the first stage of Fairfield’s evolution to create a robust, modern entrepreneurial community. The formation of the FEA marked the beginning of the second stage. Marketing companies, software companies, and telecommunication companies gained traction, attracted equity investors, started generating serious revenues, and created jobs by the hundreds.

As companies were acquired, went public, and successfully merged with larger companies, this freed up capital, managers, and highly skilled workers. By the mid

Using entrepreneurial success stories helps educate and improve the entrepreneurial literacy. The annual Entrepreneur of the Year awards were a start as was coverage of local business news in the local media. In 2002, the FEA created the Fairfield Entrepreneur Hall of Fame.



Photo Credit: Werner Einker

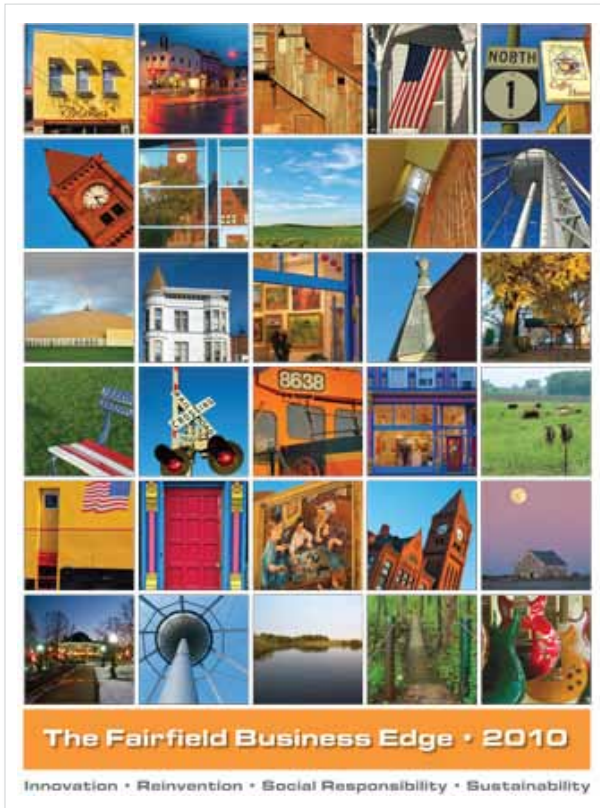
Fairfield Entrepreneurs Association networking event at Fairfield Arts and Convention Center

1990’s, Fairfield became a serial entrepreneurial community. Exits, as a result of success or failure, freed up capital and a seasoned workforce to create a new generation of ventures. And jobs grew faster than the population. Approximately 25 percent of the workers in Fairfield commute from surrounding counties in Iowa.

FAIRFIELD ENTREPRENEURS ASSOCIATION

How did the FEA do it? And what did it do? The FEA is a non-profit organization with no full-time employees and a modest budget of \$100,000. This is the total budget over the last 20 years, not an annual budget. One of the first things the FEA did was to create an annual award for the Entrepreneur of the Year.

The Chamber of Commerce executive at the time was incredulous that there were successful startups in Fairfield so the FEA created the *Fairfield Business Review* to profile the number of new startup companies that were operating without any support of the traditional economic development organizations. What began in 1989 has been an ongoing effort to continue to educate the local



Fairfield Business Edge Magazine Cover

community about entrepreneurship – what it takes to get started, how to get financed, and how to market.

At the time, there were three negative attitudes and conversations that had to be shifted. These attitudes are prevalent in rural communities across the U.S. and Canada:

- You are crazy to start your own business.
- If you don't succeed, you are a loser.
- You are better than us if you are successful.

Using entrepreneurial success stories helps educate and improve the entrepreneurial literacy. The annual Entrepreneur of the Year awards were a start as was coverage of local business news in the local media. In 2002, the FEA created the Fairfield Entrepreneur Hall of Fame. These stories hit home the legacy of innovation, struggle, and breakthroughs.

When the Fairfield Entrepreneurs Association wanted to set up a resource center, rather than set up a separate location and library for books, magazines, CDs, and DVDs to support entrepreneurs, the FEA helped turn the Fairfield Public Library into an economic gardening hot spot by contributing funds and helping select the resources that would provide critical resources for business startups and expansion.

FAIRFIELD'S BUSINESS EDGE

The 2010 *Fairfield Business Edge* magazine, a revival of the 1990 *Fairfield Business Review*, contains over 40 profiles of Fairfield businesses. Most people in the city don't know that two of the greenest businesses in Iowa are in Fairfield. They aren't startups but century old manufacturers, Harper Brush Works and Dexter Apache. Harper Brush, with a goal to have a zero carbon footprint, has a successful line of eco-friendly products made of recycled plastic. Dexter Apache, which has improved the water and energy efficiency of its commercial laundry equipment by 60 percent over the last six years, provides incentives for employees to buy hybrid cars, encourages biking to work during the summer, and wants to get off the grid and use locally-produced renewable energy for its operations.

Asset quilting can be applied to for-profit businesses, non-profit organizations, strategic planning, and new initiatives. The profiles in *The 2010 Fairfield Business Edge* highlight strategies that have given Fairfield businesses an edge over their competitors. They include blue ocean strategies, riding the new technology wave, reinvention, and team coherence.

Many factors have contributed to giving the city an edge overall: asset quilting, state-of-the-art Internet access (created by local ISPs), strategic central geographic location with excellent freight options via truck or rail, an ideal climate with four moderate seasons, and the famous Midwestern work ethic and high quality of life. The standard of living is more affordable; you can still buy a nice house for under \$100,000.

The population is well educated and sophisticated. In fact, only two cities in Iowa have a higher percentage of college graduates: Iowa City and Ames, the homes of the University of Iowa and Iowa State University, respectively

The city has an extensive international population due to the attraction of Maharishi University of Management. Students from every corner of the globe, including over 70 countries, seek out Fairfield and its unique educational opportunities for undergraduate and graduate education.

Entrepreneurial success has garnered awards and attention in the national press over the last decade. Fairfield was the inaugural winner of the Grass Roots Entrepreneurship Award from the National Council of Small

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Communities and the Community Vitality Center's Entrepreneurial Community of the Year in 2003. It was named one of six Iowa Great Places in 2006 by the state of Iowa due to its leadership in sustainability, entrepreneurship, and the arts. And the Fairfield Art Walk, held on the first Friday of every month, is a recipient of the Iowa Tourism of the Year Award.

INNOVATIVE TREND-SETTING CITY

Fairfield has been an innovative community since it was first established in the 1800s. City fathers early on recognized the importance of infrastructure and transportation. Securing the Rock Island Railroad intersection with the Burlington and Missouri River Railroad was an important step in attracting and expanding manufacturing businesses. With this, the city was able to attract Turney Wagon Works, which made the "Cadillac" of wagons, and The Dexter Company (now Dexter Apache), which made commercial laundry equipment and predates Maytag.

Photo Credit: Burt Chojnowski



Fairfield Art Walk

In recent years, local businesses were among the first to leverage the Internet for e-commerce. Local entrepreneurs provided the first Internet services, and today Fairfield is considered one of the most wired communities in the country. Meditation and Ayurveda have gone mainstream in the U.S., but Fairfield was the place where they were first popularized.

The direct response television industry was started in the city and continues to be dominated by Hawthorne Direct. Cambridge Investment Research, one of Fairfield's fastest growing employers, has thrived in the financial services market primarily due to innovative and customized products.

The city has been home to two telecommunication callback companies and resellers, Telegroup and USA Global Link, and a voice-over-Internet company, Cool-Call. All three created competitive technological strategies that enabled them to compete in international markets and helped force monopolistic, national carriers to de-regulate.

Presidential candidates have made a beeline to Fairfield over several campaign cycles. When Barack Obama won the Iowa Democratic caucuses in 2008, the *New York Times* front-page story was about Fairfield Mayor Ed Malloy's endorsement of Obama and the Obama's repeated visits to the city to garner support. When U.S. Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack was first elected governor of Iowa, he said it was the support of Fairfield and Jefferson County that was critical for his success and tipped the campaign in his favor.

COMMUNITY-WIDE ASSET QUILTING

Some of the greatest community-wide collaborative accomplishments in recent years have been the 10-year Fairfield Strategic Plan and the Fairfield Go-Green Plan, each of which had buy-in and commitments from scores of organizations to implement specific objectives of the plans. The successful development of the 1st Fridays Art Walk that attracts up to 5,000 people monthly happened because different groups like the Society of Fairfield Italian Americans (SOFIA) took responsibility for an Art Walk. SOFIA presents an Italian Street Festival every June. Employees at Iowa State Bank and Trust Company in Fairfield put on Oktoberfest.

The Fairfield Arts and Convention Center opened in 2007. It was an incredible undertaking for a city of this size. A couple of social entrepreneurs, Suzan Kessel and Sally Denny Neff, dreamed up the idea



Photo Credit: Werner Einker

Fairfield Arts and Convention Center

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Revelations – economic gardening hot spot in Fairfield

of a permanent theater to showcase the lively amateur-community theater in the city, after attending a Fairfield Area Community Theater production in a rainstorm in the mid 1990s. The rain pounding on the metal roof in the outdoor arena at the Jefferson County Fairgrounds drowned out the actors and musicians.

The public-private partnership that was necessary to fund the \$8 million facility included the city of Fairfield, numerous arts organizations, corporations, individuals, Iowa State Bank and Trust Company of Fairfield, and the USDA. Dozens of community organizations share the facility including the Fairfield Musicians Club, Fairfield Chamber Music Society, Fairfield Concert Association, 1st Fridays Art Walk, Fairfield Area Community Theater, Way Off Broadway, and Parsons College Wall of Fame. Way Off Broadway is Iowa's only professional musical theatre company and the residential theatre company for the Stephen Sondheim Center for the Performing Arts in Fairfield.

Civic and social entrepreneurship in Fairfield and Jefferson County is robust. There are over 160 nonprofits and foundations with assets in excess of \$270 million, and Jefferson County ranks as the number-one county in Iowa in per capita giving.

A MODERN UTOPIA

In the summer of 1979, Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, the founder of the Transcendental Meditation Program, invited 2,000 attendees at a World Peace Assembly at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst to move to Fairfield, the home of Maharishi International University, to live and start businesses in a social experiment to create world peace.

When the newcomers arrived in Fairfield, there weren't a lot of job opportunities. What followed was a lot of trial and error with entrepreneurial startups of every type imaginable. Young entrepreneurs started looking to emerging markets due to the deregulation of television advertising and telecommunications for business opportunities. Computer programmers created software companies to provide products for the exploding number of personal and business computers. "Food-preneurs" built successful businesses selling brownies, cheesecakes, and ice cream.

Even artists and authors created their own business opportunities. Marci Shimoff and Jennifer Read Hawthorne partnered with successful authors Jack Canfield and Mark Victor Hansen to write the best-selling book *Chicken Soup for the Woman's Soul*. This was the start of the Chicken Soup for the Soul franchise worldwide and the beginning of a lucrative cottage industry in Fairfield. Thirteen different Fairfield-based authors have written Chicken Soup for the Soul books, accounting for a third of the total sales of this franchise's 280 million books.

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What began as an effort to teach some of the world's most ancient principles of health and peace to Americans has since spread into many aspects of life in the community, including architecture and preventive medicine. Today, two miles north of Fairfield is Maharishi Vedic

City, the first new city to be incorporated in Iowa in 19 years. Here all homes are designed and built according to the principles of an ancient Vedic system of architecture popularized as Maharishi Vastu® architecture.

FOLLYWOOD: ART AND PERFORMING ARTS CAPITAL OF IOWA

In the last decade, the city has emerged as the entertainment capital of Iowa. It is the home of Way Off Broadway (WOB), the only professional theater company in Iowa. WOB performs in the Stephen Sondheim Center for the Performing Arts, which also hosts a rich variety of world-class live theater, comedy, dance, and classical and contemporary music. Also, a cluster of small digital-media businesses has been emerging in the city in recent years. Filmmaker David Lynch hosts an annual weekend on the Maharishi University of Management campus on consciousness and creativity, and the Beach Boys recorded an album in Fairfield.

Over 500 area residents make their living as artists, authors, book-cover designers, casting directors, and videographers. Several artists have created art-based businesses such as the Sky Factory and Bovard Studio. Artists can network via the Fairfield Musicians Club; KRUU-LP, Fairfield's grassroots, listener-supported radio station; ICON Gallery; Flying Leap Art Space; the Fairfield Art Association; and the Fairfield Cultural Alliance.

ICON Gallery, Flying Leap Art Space, Fairfield Art Association, and Fairfield Convention and Visitors Bureau continually offer interactive art workshops. Local galleries and the city's monthly Art Walk offer venues for artists to exhibit their work.

NATIONAL RURAL ENTREPRENEURIAL GATHERINGS

Fairfield has been home to National Rural Entrepreneurial Gatherings since 2003 with the support of the Farm Foundation and the Community Vitality Center. These small interactive events have brought together some of the best rural entrepreneurial practitioners who have shared their expertise and case studies in an effort to accelerate success in rural communities across North America and Australia.

This informal market place of ideas has helped create new asset quilting and economic gardening entrepreneurial strategies by a cross-fertilization from folks like Ed Morrison of EDPro Weblog; Luther Snow, the architect of creating Good Groups through Asset Mapping; Chris Gibbons and Christine Hamilton-Pennell, champions of economic gardening in Littleton, Colorado; network weaver June Holley from Ohio; and Dennis West of Northern Initiatives in Northern Michigan. Other participants have included Norm Walzer and Giselle Hamm from the Illinois Institute of Rural Affairs; Kathy Moxon of California's Humboldt Area Foundation; Carla Gomez of Tapetes de Lana from Mora, New Mexico; Wayne Averett of the Tupelo Mississippi Renasant Center for IDEAs; and Barb Fails from Michigan State University.

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A gathering is for 20-25 people to meet, present, and discuss. Much of the time is free time to linger in the economic gardening hot spots in Fairfield – Revelations, Top of the Rock, Café Paradiso or the Abundance Eco Village. Many of the case studies are available at the Community Vitality Center web site at www.cvcia.org.



Maharishi University of Management

ROLE OF ECONOMIC DEVELOPERS IN CREATING THE ENTREPRENEURIAL CLASS

When the Fairfield Entrepreneurs Association programs were evolving, Bob Phipps, who was the executive director of both the Chamber of Commerce and the Fairfield Economic Development Association, was a member of the Entrepreneurs Association board and key advisor for this emerging organization. However, he recognized that the activity of the Fairfield Entrepreneurs Association, although complimentary to the local economic development organization, was entirely outside that organization's charter or capability.

No one person or agency has all the answers and a network approach to providing services to entrepreneurs is essential. Locally, that includes collaboration with other agencies as the Fairfield Entrepreneurs Association has done with the regional Small Business Development Center; Community Vitality Center; Iowa Foundation of Microenterprise; Jefferson County Supervisors; Pathfinders Resource and Conservation Development; Center for Rural Entrepreneurship; and N2TEC, the National Network of Technology, Entrepreneurship, and Commercialization. The most organic and robust solution is creating peer-to-peer support organizations that help teach financial literacy, leadership, problem solving and, most importantly, provide a network of contacts and resources that is the life-blood for every entrepreneur.

FAIRFIELD'S FUTURE TRENDS

Fairfield's future growth in business should continue in financial services, advertising/electronic media, and advanced/custom manufacturing because the business fundamentals are strong and many of the Fairfield-based companies continue to lead or dominate their industry.

The evolution of Fairfield businesses towards sustainable, green business practices and products is likely to continue because it is profitable and smart, and it allows companies to lower operating costs. The first generation of graduates from Maharishi University of Management's Sustainable Living program are currently working on projects worldwide, including assisting remote native communities in Alaska and working on urban restoration projects in Oregon. Their expertise will be sought all over the world but they will no doubt also be at the forefront of new green business creation in Fairfield.

The city's growing digital-media cluster and ongoing banquet of performing arts events enhance Fairfield's reputation as a hub for the arts. The rich pool of talented performers, artists, programmers, filmmakers, and web designers who live in the city and the available mentoring and training available in this sector should foster new business creation. A proposed Fairfield digital-media innovation center with advanced training, post-production facilities, and access to Maharishi University of Management's Media and Communications Department is also certain to accelerate this sector. The city's frequent visitors, guest performers, and former residents now active in the entertainment industry all provide an accessible network for asset quilting.

Today there is a better financing ecosystem for startup companies than ever before. Entrepreneurs have access to multiple debt and equity-financing options, ranging from \$500 nano-loans to million-dollar-plus venture-capital investments. A regional venture capital firm has a local representative to screen deal flow and mentor start up companies.

Fairfield should continue to be a magnet for creative and entrepreneurial talent due to its reputation and status as one of the premier asset quilting and economic gardening hot spots in the Midwest. 🌐

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