

Chester County Receives Revitalization Grants
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What started out as a conversation between Philadelphia Development Partnership director Jeremiah J. White, Jr. and Bishop Dickie Robbins of the Life in Christ Church during a faith-based economic conference three years ago, resulted in the development of the Chester Microenterprise Partnership. The organization, which opened its doors in December 1999, recently received a \$250,000 grant from Lieutenant Governor Mark Schweiker towards the revitalization of the City of Chester and the expansion of CMP's services.

Following that eventful conversation, PDP began a six-month intensive investigation, which yielded information regarding the needs of Chester small business owners.

Of the 100 participants who provided input through interviews, or attended focus groups, all but two of the respondents were African American. Their ages ranged from 21 to 63 years.

The findings indicated that there were four significant barriers starting, maintaining and expanding small businesses in the city. Of the respondents, 93% reported a need for increased access to capital, 84% required additional business training and 75% felt they suffered from a lack of technical assistance.

Program Director Jim Turner indicated a fourth factor, as well. He called it the intimidation factor or "fear of local government."

"When some of these people think of city hall, they think of courts and punishment," Turner said. "They were not thinking about the ways local government can help and support someone who is starting a business."

However, Chester mayor Dominic Pileggi has shown support for the program since its inception. The mayor has attended numerous conferences and hosted a networking event last November in conjunction with CMP, Chester Economic Development Authority and the Delaware County Chamber of Commerce.

While Chester is poised for major projects such as the \$300 million Riverfront Office construction in the vacant PECO generating station and a \$200million project to build a technology park, it is the small businesses, Turner said, which invigorate neighborhoods and revitalize an economically depressed city.

In addition, the Riverfront project has reportedly stalled due to opposition hiring local non-union contractors.

Turner said that the \$60,000 seed money to launch CMP came from Lt. Governor Mark Schweiker through the Pennsylvania Community Development Bank and the Commonwealth's Weed and Seed Program. Weed and Seed is a two-

pronged approach, which focuses on community-driven prevention, while it attacks the underlying roots that contribute to crime, such as unemployment, lack of a quality education and widespread poverty. At the same time, it targets state and local resources to make revitalization possible.

"Your local leadership team is helping this community realize it's fullest potential for prosperity and success. They are devising a plan for rebirth, for growth. And I've seen their determination, their commitment to Chester," Schweiker said in a 1997 speech.

After receiving the seed money, the city added an additional \$40,000 to provide business support to 120 entrepreneurs in the target area. These small businesses are defined as those with less than \$100,000 in annual sales and have no more than five employees.

Though small in scale, Turner said that the array of propositions for existing and planned businesses is impressive. Most of them, 68%, are service oriented, such as car repair, desktop publishing, alarm installation, clothing design and music instruction, to name a few. The remainder is product driven.

One businessperson became involved with CMP when the demand for original scented candles grew so quickly she began having trouble keeping up with orders. The Delaware County native now has two distributors working for her.

Valerie Ford, a single mother, said that she began selling candles to help defray the cost of her daughter's college tuition. A co-worker coaxed her to attend a CMP meeting where she joined a group of similar entrepreneurs whose help, she claimed, was invaluable in growing the business.

"My only aim at first was to have a few home parties and make some money on the side," Ford said. However Ford's new goal is to be able to leave her full-time managerial sales position and sell candles in her own store. "I really want to make something of this and pass the business along to my daughter; it would be such a shame if it doesn't take off."