

TEDCO mentorship gives Md. rural startups a leg up

By: Tim Curtis Daily Record Business Reporter September 15, 2017

With much of the focus on Maryland's tech startup community centered on Baltimore and the I-270 corridor, the Maryland Technology Development Corporation (TEDCO) has developed a mentorship program to help give companies in the state's rural areas the same access to opportunity.



Anne A. Balduzzi, who directs the TEDCO mentorship program for rural tech startups. (File photo/Maximilian Franz)

The Rural Business Innovation Initiative connects mentors with businesses in four rural regions of the state — western Maryland, southern Maryland, the upper Eastern Shore and the lower Eastern Shore.

"The central counties get a lot of attention," said Anne Balduzzi, the initiative's program administrator. "But there's a lot of interesting technology that's growing outside of those regions, but not enough people are focused in on them."

Rural startups face several problems their urban peers do not. For one, by definition these companies are in rural areas. That makes them hard to get to and harder for the owners to get to other places. It also means the main industries are agriculture and tourism. And when a startup has an idea outside of those industries, banks can be resistant to lending.

In these areas of the state, good internet service can also be less available than in the city and suburbs, where high-speed internet is widely available. Bill Bernard, TEDCO's mentor for the lower Eastern Shore region, said at his home he gets his internet from a cell tower.

For mentors in these rural regions, one of the biggest resources they can offer their clients is being available and helping to make connections.

"I think one of my biggest contributions, or TEDCO's contribution with me as a mentor, is the ability to help make those connections," Bernard said. "You know what companies need help and you can fill those gaps and needs."

Overall, Bernard helps about 30 clients through TEDCO, but he said only around 20 of them are really active. Sometimes that mentorship means a lot of face time with a startup. Other times it just means a phone call to check in.

Megan Newcomer, CEO of Viyan, a company focusing on displays for motorcycles and other parts to increase motorcycle efficiency, is one of Bernard's clients. She agreed that the connections TEDCO can offer have been a big help.

"The best thing from the mentorship is him guiding us and access to a network that we don't even know of without him," she said.



Bill Bernard, a mentor in TEDCO's program to provide guidance to rural tech startups.

Newcomer helped create Viyan (formerly called Neuro Helmet Systems) as part of business classes and competitions at Salisbury University. But she quickly realized it was something she actually wanted to pursue.

Through TEDCO, the company was able to commission a market research study, completed last month. The study helped Viyan adjust to what it thinks it can offer to the market.

The study is also an example of how Bernard thinks TEDCO can help rural businesses.

"The idea is that it's either third-party validation of the idea, or it gives you a chance to change your idea," he said. "It's really the first step into bringing your product or service into the market."

TEDCO can also offer businesses greater access to create a prototype of their product, help with business plans, and preparing for business competitions — all features Newcomer said she appreciated.

"I've learned an incredible amount within the last year and a half," she said. "I would definitely not be where I am today without all of my mentors."

Viyan hopes to roll out a couple of products to increase motorcycle performance by the end of the year.

Universities also have an important place in the rural tech startup community. The mentors of TEDCO's rural innovation program often have links to local universities. Bernard holds office hours at Salisbury.

"They are centers of the gathering of all the resources that you need to start a business, he said. "You've got people within the staff and faculty and facilities that let people exchange ideas."

But the connections remain one of the program's main attractions, something TEDCO calls the connective tissue it wants to spread statewide.

"At the end of the day, it all boils down to this ... connective tissue," Balduzzi said. "It's making the right connections for the right companies. ... The more that we can do that statewide, I think that's going to elevate the state overall."