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Entrepreneurial Network Helps Local Man Build Fire Extinguisher Business

By Monica Abeita, Regional Development Corporation for Northern New Mexico Connect

When Gordon Johnston and his wife had trouble getting the fire extinguishers serviced at their Taos bed and breakfast about five years ago, Johnston decided to launch a part-time fire extinguisher business of his own.

That one-time side venture is now the couple's central enterprise, Alpine Fire Safety Systems Inc. Johnston credits Taos Entrepreneurial Network, or TEN, with the support and connections he needed to pursue the government contracts that have made his business such a success.

TEN is an independent nonprofit organization of entrepreneurs and local community leaders that the McCune Charitable Foundation launched in 2004. TEN is now funded by Northern New Mexico Connect, which coordinates economic development projects for Los Alamos National Security LLC, operator of Los Alamos National Laboratory.

After Johnston made a presentation to TEN's board of directors, Christopher Madrid — the group's former facilitator and now a volunteer — informed him of an upcoming seminar on federal contracting. "I had never considered federal contracting but went [to the seminar] with an open and curious mind," he said. "About three years ago I received my first federal contract with the Veterans Administration in California. That contract will be up for a five-year renewal in January."

More contracts followed with the Air Force in Texas, Colorado, Oklahoma and Albuquerque. "About 18 months ago, when our B&B succumbed to the economy, I began exploring doing business with the state of New Mexico," Johnston said.

When he ran into complications in his search for state contracts, Johnston turned again to his allies at TEN. He was subsequently awarded a four-year contract to handle all state-owned fire extinguishers in two sectors of the state.

These government contracts and revenue from his other clients provide Johnston with enough money to support his family while his wife pursues graduate studies. "These dollars and cents are tangible," he said. "The intangible assistance of TEN has been having a shoulder to cry on, a smart person to guide you and a cheerleader to keep your spirits up. Without the support of the folks at TEN, I would probably still have a little part-time fire extinguisher business."

TEN's formula includes "enterprise facilitation," by which entrepreneurs are connected with the financial and organizational resources and skills they need to take a viable idea for a product or service and turn it into a business venture. Jason Pfeifer, TEN's facilitator, works with a cadre of volunteers who are experts in their field.

Pfeifer and volunteers meet with clients individually and also provide feedback and support at monthly group gatherings. The latest such gathering drew 68 people — the highest attendance in TEN's history. Meetings are open to all residents of the county where they're based.

Because of its success as an economic development model, TEN has inspired sister programs in the Northern New Mexico counties of Rio Arriba, San Miguel and Mora. The organization collaborates with other community entities that share their economic development goals. For more information about TEN, visit www.taosten.org.

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