

Great River Energy, The Power of Community

What do a shiny-red fire engine and an electric cooperative have in common?

Commitment to community. That's what Rush City discovered when it needed to upgrade fire equipment but required some additional financing. Leaders approached East Central Energy, one of 28 member cooperatives of Great River Energy. East Central Energy provided a \$240,000 USDA no-interest loan to meet the city's needs.

"People don't always realize that their electrical cooperative provides more than electricity," says Tom Lambrecht, Great River Energy's economic development coordinator. "We are an active participant in community and economic development, and our low-interest financing is just one part of our dedication to helping communities grow."

Since 1999, Great River Energy and its 28 rural electric cooperative members have helped to finance 40 projects totaling \$14 million. The electric wholesaler supplies energy to its cooperatives, who serve more than 600,000 homes and businesses. Through exclusive federal grant programs, Great River Energy and its cooperatives are able to offer loans that truly make a difference to the communities they serve.

Residents of Albany, Eden Valley, Lindstrom, Moose Lake, Rockville, Rush City and Summit, Wisc. are among those who have benefited from the investments.

"Through our projects, we have helped to create 768 new jobs and retain another 1,147," Lambrecht says. Great River Energy also provides loan application guidance and business development assistance in such areas as energy efficiency and conservation improvements.


"Our employees live in the communities they serve and are active in community leadership roles," Lambrecht adds, "so we have a vast array of information available to help new businesses choose the right location and business climate for their enterprise."

It's a role Great River Energy takes on with pride.

"We're here to help our communities continue to be vital, thriving places for those of us who call Minnesota home."



**GREAT RIVER
ENERGY®**

A Touchstone Energy* Cooperative 

www.GreatRiverEnergy.com

Anderson Entrepreneurial Center, Forum and Substance

“After 12 years of business ownership, I found myself at a crossroads.”

TOM GRONES, GEOCOMM



Tom Grones is the president and CEO of St. Cloud-based GeoComm, Inc., a national industry leader in high-tech public safety systems. Founded in 1995, GeoComm is a high-growth company that develops emergency mapping systems and communications solutions for hundreds of clients nationwide.

Starting with seven employees in 1995, GeoComm now employs 107 and anticipates increasing staff by another 24 percent. In 2006, its annual revenue was \$8.5 million. In 2007, its projected revenue is \$10.3 million.

The Anderson Entrepreneurial Center provided a growth opportunity for Grones by helping him analyze GeoComm's strategy through the Owner-President Forum. Designed to maximize learning in shorter time installments, the curriculum covers various business topics such as accounting, leadership, management reporting and competitive strategy. The forum also provides ongoing opportunities for business leaders to connect with their peers.

“Tom was an excellent candidate for the forum,” says Marc Sanderson, the Owner-President Forum's program manager and facilitator. “He altered and renewed his approach to the strategic direction of GeoComm.” With an MBA from Harvard Business School, Sanderson is also the owner-president of Wilkie Sanderson, a Sauk Rapids-based manufacturer of architectural woodworking.

Today, Grones believes that the company's new direction promises to pay long-term dividends—not just to the company, but to the larger economic community in St. Cloud. “I was sufficiently impressed with the results of my involvement that I enrolled two members of my executive staff in the current Managers' Forum,” he adds, “and I plan to send two more to the next session.”



Tom Grones

By accessing a wide spectrum of forums and services delivered by the Anderson Entrepreneurial Center, hundreds of entrepreneurs and managers have increased their overall effectiveness as business leaders. The Anderson Entrepreneurial Center aims to make an ongoing impact on the central Minnesota business community by promoting entrepreneurial excellence.



Anderson Entrepreneurial Center

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Venture Allies, No Stone Unturned



The Granite-Tops & Venture Allies Team

In 1996, Kip Cameron founded Granite-Tops. With his first plant in Cold Spring, he worked hard to forge new ground in high-end, custom stone crafting. Today, Granite-Tops is a \$15 million company.

As the company grew, it acquired a new plant in Albertville, added a warehouse and opened a Twin Cities sales office. Granite-Tops currently employs 87 people and uses many local vendors and suppliers. It also tapped into the power of local professional services like Venture Allies, central Minnesota's leading management consulting firm.

Venture Allies created a business plan defining strategies for marketing, production, and finance. The firm also helped develop a strong management team and implement business systems to facilitate rapid growth and operational excellence.

"It's been thrilling and challenging to spearhead a team that has grown over the last decade," says Cameron, "not only in size and profit, but also in business maturity and know-how." Granite-Tops is a success story about a local entrepreneur and the region that formed its bedrock.

Venture Allies management consulting firm serves Central Minnesota, offering custom consulting services in strategy, structure and systems.



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Granite Equity Partners, Seeing the Bigger Picture



Alyssa & Gene Schreder

When Gene and Alyssa Schreder purchased Media Pro in 1997, the company produced pre-show advertisements for ten theaters and eighty cinema screens. In 2006, the company's ads were viewed by 100 million patrons in 350 theaters nationwide.

Now known as UniqueScreen Media, its employment grew from 15 people in 1997 to over 175 in 2006. Their many local partners include Cinema Entertainment Corporation, United Entertainment Corporation, Leonard Street, Marco, LarsonAllen, Apollo Insurance, Netgain Technology and the Anderson Entrepreneurial Center.

Granite Equity Partners provided funding for the company's rapid growth between 2004 and 2006, along with governance services to guide its strategy. When the company combined with Access Integrated Technologies, Inc. (NASDAQ: AIXD), stockholders benefited from a significant return on their investments. Today, part of that capital is being reinvested in central Minnesota companies.

"Being an entrepreneur is exciting and rewarding while, at the same time, frightening," Gene says. "Granite Equity provided us with the funding and strategic guidance needed to meet all our goals."

"Owning a business is very demanding," Alyssa adds. "Granite Equity had the means to provide help and support when we needed it."

Granite Equity Partners is a Minnesota-based private equity firm focused on buyouts, recapitalizations, and growth equity investments in Minnesota and adjoining markets.



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Initiative Foundation, In Search of Greener Ventures

Introducing our Green Business Loan Fund...

Thanks to a cutting-edge investment from the Northwest Area Foundation, we are now seeking 13 surefire business ventures that will change the world by changing the ways in which we impact our natural environment.

To qualify for special loans up to \$250,000, businesses must have a primary lender and tackle one or more of the following:

- Deliver a product or service associated with environmental preservation, protection, mitigation or clean-up
- Reduce current energy demands for residences or businesses
- Transform waste materials into a marketable product
- Create “green-collar” jobs that pay at least \$15 per hour in a lower-income community (required)

Jay Idzorek once collected Ironton area restaurant grease to make biodiesel fuel in his garage. In 2006, he joined forces with the Initiative Foundation to launch Green Range Renewable Energy, the only biodiesel plant in northern Minnesota. How green is it? Even the retail gas pumps are powered by wind turbines.

Green Range purchases local soybean oil and waste grease, and then refines it to remove pollutants and water. Add a catalyst and it becomes very eco-friendly fuel that gives petroleum diesel a run for its money. Biodiesel costs about 10 to 25 cents less per gallon, it's safe for any diesel-fueled engine, and it produces 50 to 80 percent fewer toxic emissions.

That's just the type of business we're looking for. If you are a serious entrepreneur and believe you can make some green by going green, we'd love to hear from you. Contact Ashley Vargo, business finance officer, at (877) 632-9255 toll-free or avargo@ifound.org.



**INITIATIVE
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