



21st Century Rural

Rural Maryland is rarely synonymous with tech industry companies, but one group is looking to change that perception. Adventure Capital, located in Garrett County is gathering steam on a new initiative to locate broadband-connected business to the Mountains of Western Maryland. The initiative was launched in midsummer of 2017 under the nonprofit group, Engage Mountain Maryland (EMM). The organization saw a need to catapult their community into the 21st Century by inviting internet-based businesses to the wilds of the Appalachian Mountains. Their call for business types is wide and includes data processing, government contracts, research and development, call centers, back-office support, light manufacturing, and any number of companies that no longer require daily face-time with clients.

"This is not a new idea," says Mark Stutzman, President of EMM. "I've worked from Garrett County for close to 30 years with clients from all over the world." It's common that companies look overseas to cut costs after comparing expenses in US metropolitan areas but Adventure Capital points out the advantages of keeping businesses in a more affordable, inshore location and planting themselves firmly on American soil.

Three key components Adventure Capital offers businesses is a close proximity to the largest US population, access to numerous respected Universities, a native English-speaking workforce, and being within the Eastern Standard Time Zone. Companies with offices located overseas can often have limited hours of operation that overlap, presenting big management challenges. Stutzman

has been working closely with fellow board member, Eric Robison who first conceived of the idea several years back. "I brought it up a few times but it never seemed to get traction," Robison explains. "Once we put our heads together, it seemed to take off. We needed to do the research on what companies and their workers are looking for and then put a face on the idea so people could embrace the concept more fully."

And, that's exactly what has happened. The pair set to work building a website and social media presence to explain how Rural Sourcing benefits businesses that may be looking for a more affordable way to run their business. Besides the obvious savings like finding cheaper square feet for less cramped office space or enjoying lower wage demands, many tech industry CEOs are desperate to lower attrition rates. The cost for companies to fully train an employee, according to Adventure Capital, averages around \$4,000; less for blue-collar employees and more for management staff. If this expense can be reduced, companies could see huge savings and offer a happier, healthier work environment.

With an average employee only lasting 18 months in cubical industries, training and recruitment costs can be staggering over time. "Poor quality of life is typically to blame for the high attrition rates," Stutzman continues. "Changing work and home environments could have a major impact on how long employees stick around." Adventure Capital's website addresses the common reasons for worker burnout and how an improved quality of life can ease the struggle human resources personnel face just keeping chairs filled. Short, relaxing commutes mean more time for friends, family, outdoor recreation, and decompression. A strong, rural community spirit is also a signature calling card rural life can promise. "Life outside the office in our location is a vacation experience every day. We offer incredible outdoor adventure during all four seasons," Stutzman says emphatically.

This is not an exaggeration since Garrett County is the number one four-seasons vacation destination in Maryland's mountains and home to several state parks, lakes, streams and the Youghiogheny River that attracts whitewater enthusiasts. The local Chamber of Commerce boasts a 6 percent growth for two consecutive years with Deep Creek Lake and WISP Ski Resort as the centerpieces luring visitors from a wide radius. Part-time and full-time residents ring Deep Creek Lake's 67 miles of shoreline with a robust real estate market offering luxury homes with multi-million dollar price tags.

Beyond the notable natural resources, Adventure Capital looked at Garrett College near Deep Creek Lake, for advice on workforce development. If businesses are coming to the area, they wanted to be certain the local market could supply young talent. The college has the unique distinction of offering free tuition to all Garrett County high school



Adventure Capital presents to Garrett County Community Action Representatives

graduates and targets programs that provide certificate and AA degrees. The two-year, community college also offers signature curricula designed around local business needs which can provide huge savings to companies looking for work-ready employees.

"We saw a direct correlation between Adventure Capital's initiative and what Garrett College offers," shared Dr. Richard Midcap, Garrett College President. "We can mold programs to target specific needs so students are fully prepared to enter the workplace while catering to businesses hungry for new graduates." Technology is a top priority for Garrett College with the addition of their new STEM building. The project will allow the college to train students in computer science, cybersecurity, and related technical fields employing state-of-the-art technology and updated curriculum, including a computer science program launched in Fall 2017. "We're extremely excited about our new facility becoming available to our teaching staff and next generation students. It's right on track with current education and employment trends," Dr. Midcap expounds.

Broadband has become a huge priority in this unassuming rural part of Maryland as county officials recognize it's the way of the future. "There's no doubt that broadband can invite new businesses to our area," says Paul Edward, County Commissioner Chair. "We recognize that need and have been building the network up and out to make it more available while providing faster bandwidths. We have sites ready to go, some fiber accessible, and others in our plans for expansion." The County is working to increase coverage as quickly as possible as demand is rapidly growing.

The town of Oakland, the County Seat is also looking at providing 1-gigabyte service to commercial customers in the short term. This is a collaborative effort between the Greater Oakland Business Association (GOBA), Economic Development, and Adventure Capital. "With this kind of speed, commercial space in Oakland should be in high demand," says Fred Gregg, GOBA President. "It is just the kind of capital improvement we need to meet industry demands." The collaboration is focused on filling second-story office space in the downtown area to increase foot traffic for local merchants as part of an economic growth strategy. There are also existing businesses that would benefit by having a lightning-fast bandwidth upgrade to improve customer service and productivity.

Over the last six months, anchor stakeholders have been pursued so new companies will have a strong network of support, according to Robison. "Everyone we've spoken to has been very enthusiastic and willing to collaborate on rolling out the welcome mat for new business." From local government to state agencies, lending institutions and business organizations, the network continues to grow. "We're also pleased that the new business we're looking to attract does not compete with existing businesses in our area. We have plenty of room for this industry sector that will provide economic growth to our area."

The next step is building a welcome conference that could be as early as fall of 2018 to coincide with the completion of the new Garrett College STEM building. The X\$pend Conference will

highlight how the inflated costs associated with metro business models can become a thing of the past for executives needing to reduce overall spending and increase their competitive edge. CEOs can enjoy the spoils of placing their business where their employees can enjoy working and call it home.

Conference updates are available to those who sign up at AdventureCapital.biz. The event plans to bring a respected keynote speaker, provide opportunities to meet with business partners, local government officials, municipality leaders, tour the new college STEM building and experience Mountain Maryland's best through meet & greets, adventure tours, and outdoor activities. "We plan to keep this first conference more intimate to make sure each guest is given proper attention," says Stutzman. "With the help of our community, we're excited to introduce Garrett County as a friendly, inviting place to locate offices and work families that are ready to escape the trappings of congested urban and suburban living. We have a lot to offer that needs to be experienced first-hand to fully appreciate."

It may seem unusual that a nonprofit would be willing to take on this economic initiative. "There were several local issues that prompted EMM to launch this initiative," Robison explains. "One included losing our economic development director very suddenly, leaving a hole that needed to be filled. This Rural Sourcing idea had been floating around for a while and the timing seemed right. If we can pull the businesses in, our county staff has the ability to get them settled in even without a director leading the way."

The nonprofit and their representatives have no personal gain with the initiative. They simply believe it's a solid plan to grow the community they care about while providing beneficial outcomes for businesses struggling with their bottom line.



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