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June 11, 2007  
**Section:** BUSINESS  
**Edition:** Final/All  
**Page:** C01

**Helping hand**  
 MARIA SONNENBERG  
*Freelance*

MARIA SONNENBERG  
 FOR FLORIDA TODAY

After jeweler Pam Pedersen decided to open her own store, she realized that 15 years in the industry and a spate of college business classes weren't enough to help her navigate through the maze of required permits and licenses.

Fortunately, a champion of Pedersen's quest for entrepreneurship appeared in the form of Bill Pehaim, small-business incubator manager for Palm Bay.

Pehaim's nuts-and-bolts small-business courses helped Pedersen attain the holy grail of business ownership.

Pedersen, one of the first graduates of Palm Bay's Technical Assistance Program, is a firm believer in the program's nurturing abilities.

"If I hadn't had those classes, I might have been so overwhelmed I might have given up," said Pedersen, who opened her Palm Bay store several weeks ago. "College business classes don't prepare you for the real world."



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The Palm Bay program is part of the city's strategy to attract and keep small businesses. And it is among various programs throughout Brevard County that seek to aid new businesses.

"We're here to help the mom-and-pop businesses," Pehaim said. "The whole idea is to help small businesses run more efficiently."

To that end, Pehaim conducts weekly seminars at Palm Bay Community Center, where he invites a cadre of professionals that typically interact with small businesses -- from attorneys to bankers, code-enforcement officials and fire department personnel -- to discuss issues critical for the success of a small company.

To graduate, Pedersen had to attend 11 months of classes and pay \$50 a month.

It was time and money well-spent, she said.

"Even if you're not planning to open a business in Palm Bay, it's still worth it, because there's so much practical information presented," Pedersen said. "It's great to know you're not alone out there."

The city is considering refurbishing its original City Hall into a formal business incubator location.

The facility would follow the traditional incubator model, which typically includes access to short-term, flexible leases at below-market costs; furnished office space; receptionist and clerical support; high-speed Internet access and conference room space.

Additionally, incubators offer clients business development and networking opportunities, as well as workshops and seminars on securing grants and investment capital.

Students in the Technical Assistance Program then could grow their ventures under the wing of Pehaim and other city staff.

"The aim is to make it affordable for them," Pehaim said.

If Palm Bay goes ahead with the plan, it will join other municipalities that are already offering incubator space.

#### **TRDA** programs

Technological Research and Development Authority launched its Florida/NASA Business Incubator Center more than a decade ago, choosing Brevard County for its perfect market profile.

"The county tends to be very high-tech-oriented," **TRDA** Executive Director Chester Straub said. "In this area, successful local economies also tend to be driven by businesses starting from within."

Unlike many incubator programs that recruit businesses from across the board, **TRDA**, also known as the **TRDA**, focuses primarily on technology.

Located on the Titusville campus of Brevard Community College, the Florida/NASA Business Incubator Center offers small technology companies convenient access to business resources and amenities that reduce overhead expenses.

American Services Technology Inc., the first graduate of the Titusville business incubator, is an example of how such programs are designed to work.

Graduating from the business incubator program in 1998, American Services Technology began with two employees.

By 2001, American Services Technology the company recorded a five-year sales growth of 736 percent, with revenues exceeding \$7.2 million.

Just two years later, the company was named to Inc. magazine's list of 500 fastest-growing private companies in the United States.

Today, American Services Technology has 130 employees, nine locations and revenues of more than \$10 million.

Command and Control Technologies Corp. is another **TRDA** success.

In 1997, the company, a three-person high-tech computer products and services endeavor, joined the Titusville-area incubator.

The following year, Command and Control Technologies received the NASA-Kennedy Space Center Small Business Contractor of the Year Award, as well as a NASA technology license to sell its command and control tool kit.

"We started the company on a shoestring budget," Command and Control President Peter Simons said. "Setting up in the (Florida/NASA Business Incubator Center) allowed us to save the investment we would have made on infrastructure. I expect we would have succeeded in the long run, but we would definitely be in fewer markets."

**TRDA** now has headed south for its newest incubator facility. Its 31,000-square-foot Melbourne complex on NASA Blvd. will house as many as 25 small businesses after it officially opens in a few weeks.

"Melbourne has a very high-growth potential for technology, and we wanted to avail ourselves of the proximity to large high-tech companies like Harris, Grumman and GE," Straub said.

Leases at the new facility will run from \$270 to \$700 a month.

To be considered for a lease at the new Business Innovation Center, small companies must graduate from **TRDA's** Roadmap to Success Workshop, a weekly series of classes similar to Pehaim's in Palm Bay.

Loretta Kish, president of Sea-Watch, a company specializing in online monitoring and control of marine vessels, is one of **TRDA's** current students.

Her goal is to obtain office space at the new Business Innovation Center.

"It would give my business a lot of exposure," she said.

The classes also have been helpful.

"For me, it's more of a refresher course," said Kish, who worked in the electronics field since the 1970s. "For new businesses, these classes can help you see if you have a viable product. It's a good approach to check out what your company and market is worth."

#### Cocoa Enterprise Center

Like **TRDA**, the Cocoa Enterprise Center leases office space and offers services at reduced costs, with the aim of nurturing new businesses.

Companies can rent space as small as 150 square feet and pay \$1 a square foot per month for a flexible amount of time.

Other services include business assistance counseling, training and administrative support services. Cocoa Enterprise Center also points the way to available venture capital.

"We also provide access" to Small Business Administration loans, said Clarence Greenidge, business developer/incubator manager for the city. "It can make a big difference to a small business. Being in an incubator helps small businesses to eventually take flight."

The city's facility on King Street included a 5,500-square-foot building converted for mixed-use business, as well as an adjoining warehouse available for light manufacturing and warehouse operations.

Copiers, fax machines, computers with high-speed Internet access, a resource library and meeting rooms are at the occupants' disposal.

Cocoa businesses in the incubation stage currently include a health-insurance company, contractors and a human-resources recruitment company.

Like Pehaim, Greenidge offers training classes that tap into the knowledge of bankers, insurance brokers, accountants and other guest speakers.

"They get the truth straight from the horse's mouth," Greenidge said.

Cocoa's incubator program began five years ago, as a one-stop shop to stimulate stagnant communities and improve life for low- to moderate-income residents.

Incubators, however, are not a way to do business permanently.

Incubation facilities are designed as temporary lodging. Occupants can leave as soon as they feel comfortable striking out on their own. The limit usually is three years or less.

"It's all dependent upon whether you come in as a true startup or you're a little more advanced," Straub said.

Once a business is ready to take off, incubators then point them to additional assistance from agencies such as Economic Development Commission of Florida's Space Coast.

"Incubators give companies a location to grow in a cost-effective way," Straub said.

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#### Global impact

--- 300 million entrepreneurs: In 2003, 300 million people launched more than 192 million new firms.

--- Creating jobs: 80 percent of those firms anticipated creating new jobs within five years.

--- Job impact: Firms less than a year old provide between 2 percent and 15 percent of a country's total number of jobs.

--- Gender breakdown: 64 percent of startups were directed by men.

--- Leading and trailing nations: Countries with highest entrepreneurial activity were Chile, Korea, New Zealand, Venezuela and Uganda. The lowest were Sweden, Netherlands, Taiwan, Croatia, Japan and Russia.

--- Venure-capital participation: Less than 37 out of every 100,000 startups in the world receive venture capital.

#### Global Entrepreneurship

Report of 41 countries

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#### By the numbers

Here is the Florida/NASA Business Incubation Center impact:

\$10 million Increase in regional capital investment

\$46 million Increase in area household income

\$66 million Increase in gross regional product

\$825,000 Additional local tax revenue generated

-- 2006 East Central Florida Regional Planning Council Economic Analysis

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