

## Innovators showcase their products

By Amelia Veneziano Daily News staff writer | Posted: Saturday, November 5, 2011 12:00 am

There's more than wheat on the Palouse.

Organic apple rings, alcoholic jam, waste disposal, chemical product testing and more were on display Thursday at the Palouse Knowledge Corridor Business Showcase.

Six local entrepreneurs, ranging in size, type and target audience, presented their wares to members of the businesses community, seeking advice, input and, maybe, investors.

The showcase was the first for the Knowledge Corridor, said corridor co-chair Francis Benjamin. It was co-hosted by Valley Vision, which focuses on economic development in the Lewis-Clark Valley.

"We want to highlight the emerging corridor in the region," Benjamin said. "There are a whole lot of great opportunities in this region that people don't know about and we wanted to introduce people to them."

About 60 people - ranging from the business-minded to curious members of the community - came to find out more.

"We want to build certified investors who want to invest in our region," Benjamin said.

The audience ranged from other business owners to community economic and government leaders and investors.

The partnership with Valley Vision links the Quad Cities together, said Doug Mattoon, executive director of Valley Vision.

"There's probably nowhere in the country with two universities, a college and a community college and 150,000 people," Mattoon said. "There are great opportunities for people to invest locally. We need innovators, inventors and investors - when the time comes."

The Palouse Knowledge Corridor and Valley Vision hope this becomes a recurring event, with showcases in each of the quad cities.

Six businesses were preselected for the showcase. They represented most of the communities in the area, and some burgeoning industries. They were selected based on their business plan and readiness to move, Benjamin said.

Each business owner had 15 minutes to introduce themselves and their business or product, then answer questions from the audience.

Each business was out to show how it was different, how it could grab the market and why it could succeed.

Mike and Mindy Hicks, owners of Noah's Ark, in Palouse, told the crowd that there no other business has an organic, gluten-free product in grab-bag size.

They also said the gluten-free industry has grown, from about \$1 million in 2006 to \$17 million this year.

Audience questions ranged from how the Hicks' tested the product to price point determination - and the hard questions continued.

The crowd wanted to know how Bronzestone owner Heath Barnes, from Clarkston, would compete with hummus producers like Kraft and PepsiCo - which make market leaders Athenos and Sabra, respectively - while maintaining the product quality.

Clarkston-based Best Life International introduced Maxelence, a caffeine-free energy drink packet soluble in water. The NASCAR-supported product already has capital and sponsors, but is looking to break into the national market and work with larger food companies.

The chemical makeup of the drink packets, and the future flavors, portions and pricing plans were on the minds of audiences for the more established company.

Questions for Thomas Kurdy and Barry Holbron, who own Mobile Utility Systems in Genessee, which creates sanitary latrines for human waste disposal in places like the South Sudan or disaster-ravaged parts of the U.S., ranged from the barriers to business - cultural, economic and costs of shipping the latrines - to what their goals were for moving forward.

Potential growth was on the minds of the crowd for Viral Science's Dirk Wischmeier. Viral Science tests vaccines and other pharmaceutical products used for human and animal health. Although the company has 10 employees, expanding another eight in the near future wouldn't be unheard of - and the room wanted to know what those additional positions could mean to the community.

Viral Science is building a testing facility in Moscow.

But the restless group at the BellTower was about to get a laugh.

WSU students Brian Doherty and Rick Snell created Aunt Rose's Hard Jam, a fruit-based jam that ran 10 percent alcohol by volume. Between catchy phrases and a goal of marketing with Stephen Colbert in mind, the two rolled out their plans and offered product samples.

But alcoholic jam has its own problems, ranging from its classification as a food to high price markups, both things that had the crowd asking questions.

The chance to present their products was valuable, said Mike Hicks, handing out samples of baked apples.

"We're trying to let people know what we're doing and build," Hicks said. "Our ultimate goal is to put the idea and information out there."

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