



August 14, 2009

Two companies to expand in downtown B.C.

Partner businesses to aid revival

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The Enquirer

Two fledgling companies have made their nests in downtown Battle Creek.

MessageCoach, a communications firm, and corePHP, a communications technology developer, moved from kitchen countertops and cramped conference rooms to 62 E. Michigan Ave., where they can expand their operations.

They are strategic partners, commissioned by Battle Creek Unlimited, to better communicate BCU'S plan to revitalize downtown Battle Creek.

"We needed some help," said Jim Hettinger, senior adviser to BCU.

The plan to revitalize downtown through food science, education and business development met some resistance from people who don't want to see old buildings torn down.

Hettinger said the mostly-vacant buildings on the northeast corner of West Michigan Avenue and McCamly Place contribute to blight and a perception of danger in downtown Battle Creek.

Others contend that the buildings have value and criticize BCU for not communicating better with the community.

So BCU has asked its engineers to explore several alternative ways to bring an events space downtown. Hettinger said one idea is to raze just two buildings instead of four. Another would be to transform parking space at the former Cereal City U.S.A.

It also hired MessageCoach and corePHP to help explain, for example, why the park is needed and why a movie theater wouldn't work downtown.

"Communications, in one form or another, has always been my calling," said Julie Metea, principal of MessageCoach.

Metea formerly worked in the auto industry and freelances for trade magazines, but said owning her own business has been her dream all along.

She started at her kitchen counter in Dearborn, but when it came time to expand, she said Detroit was behind the technology curve and Ann Arbor was too crowded for a new, small business.

Then she found Battle Creek, what she called "the last frontier" for emerging businesses focused on communications and technology. With the help of BCU, she said landing contracts with businesses in need of communications help will be easy.

"I guess the secret's out now," she said. "There are a ton of businesses that are ripe for the picking. So we're happy to be here."

And for corePHP, a technology developer BCU incubated in the Fort Custer Industrial Park area, the move downtown was like a return back home.

Founders Jonathan Shroyer and twin brothers Steven and Michael Pignataro grew up in the Battle Creek area. With BCU's help, they have grown their company to eight employees and two business partners, and landed contracts with more than 200 clients worldwide, including Kentucky Fried Chicken.

"There are so many resources that people don't even know about," Shroyer said of BCU's support for small business.

Modeling their company work ethics on Google and Microsoft, corePHP's founders have incorporated a video game break room into their new office space, and dogs are always welcome.

Teddy, the office terrier, and Zoey, a King Charles spaniel, were out of the office for hair and nail appointments Wednesday.

Metea and Shroyer said their first goal in better communicating BCU's vision for downtown Battle Creek is to be good listeners. Their doors are open to public input during regular business hours, they said. They also are gathering input on Facebook, the popular social networking Web site.

"They are young people, very creative, tech savvy," Hettinger said. "The future's theirs in terms of communications, and communication is extremely important to our economy. I can see them doing very well in the future."

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