

## **Create Bridges BRE Survey Summary – 3Cs (Howard, Little River, Sevier)**

### **Survey Participants**

56 small business responses from a variety of rural retail, accommodation, entertainment, service, finance, education, and health organization reflect a broad snapshot of the rural economy and business needs in 2018-2019. 17 responses were collected in group discussions, while 33 responses were collected in one-on-one interviews with Julianne Dunn and regional volunteers. Sizes of businesses ranged from 1 to 125 employees. Of those responding, 64% employ five or less full-time employees, including themselves, with 52% employing part time employees.

### **Employment Trends**

32% of respondents have changed the number of employees over the 3 years. Decreased number of employees have been due to slower business or closing of stores. Increased number of employees have been due to increase of seasonal traffic, increase of business, or the business opened within the last 3 years and needed more assistance as they have been open. Rate of turnover was not an issue for 75% of respondents. Leading barriers to finding employees are:

- Low pay available
- Lack of education or specialized skills
- Lack of interest in job requirements
- Finding workers with essential soft skills, work ethic, and time availability

Positions difficult to fill include cook, housekeeping, front desk clerk, dishwasher, crafts people, and front-line supervisors.

Recruitment of open positions is mostly done by word of mouth, followed by social media posts and ads.

Benefits offered by employers include flexible scheduling, discounted meals and product, and vacation days. 25% of employers offer insurance for full-time employees that can include health, dental, and vision insurance. The majority of respondents indicate that they do not offer health insurance due to cost.

### **Skills and Training**

When asked about preferred skills for workers, the prioritized employee soft and specialized skills were:

- Face to face communications
- Phone Etiquette
- Teamwork
- Appropriate Dress
- Customer Service
- Time Management
- Cash Handling

16 of 57 respondents provide they have a formal employee onboarding that consists primarily of shadowing managers or fellow employees between 2-14 days. 20 respondents noted they provide

training beyond orientation, primarily to share new technology or products or to adhere to state guidelines.

The most commonly indicated factors impacting employees are child/elder care, broadband access, and housing, specially for renting or middle income housing.

### **Customers**

The majority of respondents indicate at least 80% of their sales come from within their Create Bridges region. Only 7 respondents indicated their sales come from outside the U.S.

Only 36% of respondents are either selling online or have an online presence. Challenges with an online presence include availability and consistency of internet access, limited knowledge of best practices and resources, and time constraints.

### **Advertising**

The majority of businesses are advertising on Facebook, followed by utilizing local media (print and radio), billboards, and word of mouth. Other methods of advertising include newsletters, school sponsorships, coupons, and print cards at other businesses.

### **How Technology Affects Business**

A majority of respondents did not respond to this question in-depth but of those who did, they focused on inconsistent internet access having an impact on sales. Examples included the inability to process sales through POS during a blackout, inability to access social media to advertise, and having no back-up if internet is down. Other technology challenges include the necessity to upgrade constantly to keep up with trends. A small number of respondents expressed interest in incorporating online sales into their business model. Another interest was more training for using social media efficiently to engage and recruit customers.

### **Changes in Business (pre-COVID-19)**

23 respondents are hoping for growth, expansion, and/or renovations in the next three years. 4 respondents anticipate no changes in the next three years. At least 2 are looking to transition to new leadership or to closing.

23 respondents see their client base changing, citing bringing in younger customers as essential to continued success for their businesses. Other factors include:

- creating more online customers, and
- more Spanish language community customers.

Only 16 respondents indicated they have a transition plan. The majority of these respondents have plans that include their family, while 2 will close or sell.

Selling my business or transitioning it to new ownership	11
Market research to identify existing or new customer base	22
Available economic incentives	19

Identifying financing options	7
Creating/updating my business plan	17
Energy efficiency upgrades	17
Support in hiring employees	12
Disaster relief support	8*

Other: Welcome information for new businesses on community practices and contacts, mentoring programs, young entrepreneur support, guidance on taxes and insurance, computer and technology trainings, how to gain attention from local customers and young demographics

\*interest in this topic increased in early 2020 due to COVID-19

### **Community Factors**

The majority of respondents had indicated they had seen an overall decline in activity in the business community over the past three years, with a shift to online sales and stores closing due to retirements and changing household incomes. At least one respondent indicated that having a busy store next door has helped keep business growing. Additionally, the competition with the major nearby cities has become more pronounced.

There is little consistency in answers regarding the factors affecting businesses, except for the limited availability of reliable and quality internet.

Regarding local leadership, the majority of respondents indicated their elected leadership was supportive. This appears to be dependent on if the mayor and city council are either customers or have stopped by the business. When they have not come by, the respondent feels disconnected and unsupported. Only one respondent referenced county officials and the lack of interaction.

Perspectives on local Chamber of Commerce's depends on the effectiveness of communication. If the respondent viewed the Chamber positively, it was based on being aware of Chamber activities and how they benefit member businesses and the Chamber was actively engaging and acknowledging businesses and advocating for business owner issues. If the respondent viewed the Chamber negatively, they are unaware of how the Chamber benefits the business or when events/activities are.

The majority of respondents indicated that their communities were most supportive by being customers or referring others to their businesses but could be more supportive by being loyal to local businesses and shopping local more often.

35 respondents thought they would benefit from regional promotion and branding, with only 5 who did not think they would benefit. 28 respondents see themselves as part of the tourism economy and actively promote local tourism.

### **Overall**

The most commonly expressed outcomes of Create Bridges that would benefit their businesses include:

- Regional advertising/education on promotions
- Shop Local First program
- Signage for shopping and tourism off of highways

- Grants/Loans for small business improvements
- Workforce Training – cash handling/customer service
- Entertainment for Youth/Young Adults/Older Generation (Gun range, parks, bike runs)
- Beautification
- Small Business Support and Education Opportunities
- More jobs and customers
- More tourists
- Community awareness of business ownership challenges
- Connecting regional tourism
- Market research
- More awareness for business owners and employees of resources available
- More events and activities geared towards Latinx
- More accommodation options
- Racks of information at area businesses about local businesses and tourism