

Want to start a firm and get paid?

Town launches program to help entrepreneurs

By MARK CARDWELL, Freelance April 30, 2009

Got an idea and a desire to start your own business?

Then the town of Acton Vale has a job for you.

In what is being billed as a first in Canadian business history, the local business development council is offering a year's salary - and technical and professional support - for up to seven budding entrepreneurs a year for the next three years to help them get their businesses up and running.

The offer is part of a \$500,000 pilot project that receives local and provincial funding. Its aim is to create jobs in and around the town of 7,300, about 90 kilometres east of Montreal.

"It's not easy to attract established businesses to a rural community like ours," said Mathieu Vigneault, general manager of the Acton region's Centre local de développement - or CLD - which developed the program and is managing it.

"We have to think up innovative ways to generate employment from within - and we think this is a good one."

Based on a business incubator model that a former employee saw in Belgium, the project revolves around the hiring of wannabe entrepreneurs by a cooperative set up by the CLD in January.

Starting this week, Vigneault said he is accepting applications over the Internet from people who are able and willing to work full-time to develop and open a business in Acton Vale or one of the seven other municipalities in the region.

In exchange, the co-op, whose president is Vigneault, will pay salaries of as much as \$25,000 a year.

Like classic business incubator enterprises, the co-op's offices, which are still being prepared in Acton Vale, will offer shared secretarial, computer and other services.

To be considered for the program, applicants must submit a résumé and a written description of their project to the co-op. The merits of each project are then judged by a Dragon's Den-like selection committee made up of two established local entrepreneurs, a representative of the local Caisse Desjardins (which is also a partner in the project), an accountant and Vigneault.

"Projects have to be realistic (and) the applicant has to have a proven track record in the area of business they propose," Vigneault said.

"Obviously, somebody with 20 years of experience in a given field will have a better chance than someone who thinks it'd be cool to try something on a whim."

He added that applications - and the salaries offered to those whose applications are retained - will be dealt with on a case by case basis.

In addition to \$210,000 in funding from Quebec's department of municipalities and regions, the Acton CLD has raised another \$300,000 from local municipalities and businesses, and has contributed some from its own coffers.

"For sure, salaries won't be linked to market values on education or experience," Vigneault said. "The goal isn't to have salaried workers. We want to share risk with people with entrepreneurial fibre, an idea that they are dying to develop into a business, and who just need a helping hand to get going."

The initiative comes at an opportune time. On Tuesday, Sigma Industries of Quebec City said it is closing its plant in Acton Vale, putting out of work about 40 employees who made components for truck hoods.

Applications to the region's new salaried entrepreneur program can be made on the CLD's French-only website at: www.cldacton.qc.ca