

Simmons opens business' eyes in Willington

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WILLINGTON — With 53 percent of all businesses in Connecticut having four or fewer employees, most business owners can't afford attorneys or lobbyists to fight on their behalf like big businesses.

As a result, they struggle, flail and often fail.

Willington is hoping to change that for those looking to make the town their hub of operations.

Thursday, the town's economic development commission hosted the first Willington Business Owner's Forum targeting current business owners and anyone looking to set up shop in town.

Former 2nd District U.S. Rep. Rob Simmons — nominated by Gov. M. Jodi Rell in 2007 to become Connecticut's First Business Advocate — was the forum's guest speaker.

Simmons brought his track record of business advocacy to the forum, which took place in the Willington Public Library before a crowd of 30 in the downstairs community room.

His position was established as part of the governor's 2006 "Jobs for the 21st Century" act.

Simmons' job is to "provide information on public and private programs to assist businesses, and for targeting specific small and micro businesses for growth and providing them with programs, services, technical assistance, job training and financial assistance," according to the 2007 release announcing his nomination.

Since being appointed to the position 18 months ago, Simmons said he has visited nearly 400 businesses in the state, approximately two a day.

After Thursday's forum, he may be visiting a few in Willington.

Simmons helps small businesses attempt to navigate the red tape and bureaucracy of business ownership, addressing matters unethical,

unfair, illegal or simply confusing.

He listened to some of those types of issues Thursday, including concerns about state taxes on small businesses and the cost of providing health care for employees.

Some members of the EDC admit the town isn't necessarily business friendly and say they are trying to change that, getting a head start by establishing a local business network.

The commission's goals include making Willington palatable for small and big businesses alike, but the town faces major challenges in attracting the latter.

"We need more business growth and we are primed for it ... but (the land) is lacking infrastructure," said Jim Poole, Willington EDC chairman.

The commission has had to watch interested larger businesses pass up the town for lack of water and sewer facilities.

"Part of the goal is to become more accessible for business owners who may want to come to town," said Selectman David Charette, also a member of the EDC for five years.

And while big business and small business are different entities, they can be equally vital to the local economy.

"Small businesses and micro-businesses are where the new jobs are created," Simmons said.

Those in attendance used the opportunity to collect informational resources and to meet other business owners in town.

Most everyone went home with one, or more, of Simmons' cards in their pocket.

Simmons empathized with the pressures put on small businesses by regulating agencies, calling the Occupational Safety and Health Administration, OSHA, "an evil organization."

And there are apparently many more where OSHA came from. Simmons said he is prepared to take them all on.

"If you have issues with any of these state agencies, let me know," he said.

Simmons recommended the Connecticut Occupational Safety and Health Division, CONN-OSHA, as a business friendly organization staffed with individuals trained in OSHA laws who will come in and evaluate a business environment and make recommendations for improvement.

"CONN-OSHA is your friend," Simmons said, adding they are not inclined or permitted to report to OSHA.

While the first 90 minutes went mainly to Simmons' presentation, the last half hour resulted in what EDC members were hoping for — business owners mingling with each other.

They also were able to meet with some area legislators, including state Rep. Bryan Hurlburt, D-Tolland, and state Sen. Tony Guglielmo, R-Stafford.

Simmons said such connections are important.

"If you spend 100 percent of your time at your business and you don't spend time (with legislators who can work in your interest), you lose," Simmons said.

Willington resident Linda Lee Hill operates a bakery out of her home, but is thinking seriously about moving into a commercial setting where she feels confident she can triple her business.

Hill, who was among those snapping up information brochures after the meeting, said she felt encouraged by what she learned Thursday.

"This is the first forum in Willington and I think this has been sorely needed," Hill said.

Commission members dubbed the evening a success and said they hope it will be the first of many such forums to come.

In the meantime, business owners and others with an interest in the business community are invited to attend the EDC's monthly meetings, generally held at 6 p.m. on the last Tuesday of each month.

For more information e-mail www.WillingtonEDC@gmail.com.