

Real Pickles lauded by jobs board

By **RICHIE DAVIS** Recorder Staff-December 2, 2015

SOUTH DEERFIELD — Worker-owned Real Pickles Cooperative was lauded Friday as a “workforce development leader,” recognizing the 14-year-old maker of organic pickles and relishes for its recognition of its own employees and for its “public spirit, being visible and active in the community.”

The award, one of several highlights of the 50-community Franklin-Hampshire Regional Employment Board annual meeting with area legislators, was the first ever to a worker-owned cooperative.

The company, founded in 2001 by Dan Rosenberg and Adie Holland, supports local agriculture by buying local products and lets its workers after one year buy into the company and share its profits, said award presenter John Waite, executive director of the Franklin County Community Development Corp.

Rosenberg, who is now general manager and one of eight owners of the 20-employee Greenfield company along with Holland, his wife, said among the motivations for going through the 18-month process of creating a worker-owned cooperative in 2013 was to ensure that its social mission — buying local produce and marketing just in the Northeast, while fostering workplace democracy and retaining staff — is written into the co-op’s principles.

Company ensures social mission isn’t lost. Its worker-owners “get a chance to really guide the business and the vision for Real Pickles,” with ongoing training about finance, governance and social mission, and sharing in company profits, said Rosenberg. “It’s pretty exciting to see these staff members who are now owners really thinking big picture.”

Tuesday’s event also helped call attention to the breadth of initiatives of and programs supported by the employment board, such as the Middle Skills Initiative, which helped 20-year former Gill-Montague teacher Catherine LaFleur find a new career as quality-control inspector at Kennametal, or the Disability Employment Initiative, through which Elizabeth Quilty could retrain after losing her supermarket jobs to train as a certified nurse assistant for a job at the Arbors.

“When you lose your job, you need to change the whole perspective on who you are. You want to go back and do that job, and you can’t,” Quilty told the more than 75 people gathered at Chandler’s Restaurant breakfast meeting. “You have to change the whole perspective on what you’ll do with your life.”

Board Executive Director Patricia Crosby pointed to the addition of about 70 jobs with Kennametal’s expansion in Greenfield over roughly the past year, along with more than 20 new jobs planned at VSS and about 20 additional jobs at Bayer in South Deerfield, but also noted the phase-out of 200 jobs at Rodney Hunt Co. in Orange.

But 12 employers have signed up for a state Rapid Response Team job fair planned for today in Orange, she said.

“There will be people who’ll find employment immediately, there will be people who will decide they’re going to do something totally different, maybe go into business for themselves. ... There will also be people who take advantage of the opportunity to up-skill or retrain in a different area. We’ve got a lot of people working on their behalf.”

Yet Rep. Susannah Whipps Lee, R-Athol, who attended the meeting, voiced concern for the larger impact of the Rodney Hunt layoffs in her district, already hurting economically.

“We also have to keep in mind the ripple effect of this closing: the children whose parents might be in situations where they may have fear about feeding them, housing them, and those other ripple effects that come with large scale unemployment, like we’re experiencing in the area. Thank you from the bottom of my heart, and on behalf of all the people in the area, for taking this seriously and coming out right away” to help the affected workers.

Crosby called at Tuesday’s meeting for continued state funding for its “school-to-career,” jobs center and “workforce competitiveness” funding.

Sen. Benjamin Downing, D-Pittsfield, who also attended, along with Rep. John Scibek, D-South Hadley, and as aides for other legislators, said the state’s workforce development services “aren’t just a safety net” but are there for many people around the state, and especially for workers “who fall on hard times briefly.”

Downing added, “There’s so much more that we can do on the vocational education side. We have an honorable tradition of leaving education to local control, but we need to do a better job of blending the statewide role ... and try to recognize where there are gaps in vocational education,” to provide access to training and skills for the future jobs that are needed in this economy.

Fixing those vocational education gaps, he said, will be “a crucial part of any economic development bill” that the Legislature plans to produce in the coming year.

You can reach Richie Davis at: rdavis@recorder.com or 413-772-0261, ext. 269



Real Pickles in Greenfield is a worker-owned cooperative.
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