

Small Business Incubator Study appointment made

JILL MICHAELS of Community Investments signs a contract with the city to carry out a feasibility study for a business incubator in the Hoffman building on North Main Street.

John Nolan/
Times photo



By JOHN NOLAN
jnolan@fosters.com

ROCHESTER — Following the receipt of a \$15,000 federal grant on Aug. 3 to study the viability of creating small business incubator spaces in North Main Street's Hoffman building, Rochester Economic Development Manager Karen Pollard has just announced the appointment of Vermont-based Community Investments (CI) to carry out that study.

"We had five excellent firms respond," said Pollard, explaining that a committee, of which she was a member, chose CI on the basis of its "very strong community investment component" and "experience which meets Rochester's needs."

The city, as was stated when U.S. Congresswoman Carol Shea-Porter of

officially announced the Rural Business Enterprise Grant, hopes to create an incubator capable of supporting up to 20 entrepreneurs in the Hoffman property at 55 North Main St., which has been vacant since 1986. The Hoffman building has 6,000 square feet of space on the ground floor and a similar square footage in the basement.

Jill Michaels of CI was in Rochester City Hall on Sept. 15 to sign her contract and discuss with city officials how the feasibility study should be conducted, and within what time-frame.

Part of her approach, as suggested in CI's bid submission, will be to tap the information within Rochester, and to this end, a meeting to explore such things as market demand for the incubator will be set up in early to mid

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October on a date as yet to be determined.

Michaels will be back in Rochester on Oct. 21 to ascertain the area's education facilities — such as UNH, community colleges and technical centers — that small businesses in an incubator space might have available to them.

Pollard said she was thinking of such things as the learning of marketing skills.

Parallel to this, ACT Associates, to which CI has subcontracted part of the study, will be examining the suitability of the property as incubator space, and giving the building an environmental screening, to determine if such potentially hazardous things as asbestos or lead-based paint are present.

Pollard said she does not envisage any project-stoppers coming to light, but it is an aspect of the study that must be checked out.

Michaels, in her proposal correspondence to the city, wrote, "Since to date New Hampshire incubators have focused primarily on a high tech incubator model, it will also be useful to look at other states that include specialty foods and/or art incubators and have a retail component."

This research will be done by phone, e-mail and looking online.

Michaels said that while she will serve as project manager, two other members of CI, Al Zielenski and Paul Denton, will have responsibilities. Zielenski will provide assistance on education and business outreach, and Denton will assess the financial feasibility of the venture.

The entire package of CI's feasibility study findings and recommendations has to be completed by Dec. 15.

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This will then give Pollard time to work with other city departments and with city councilors to reach decisions about which, if any, state and federal funds should be sought.

"Many of these deadlines are in the spring," she explained, adding that an economic development portion of the federal Community Development Block Grant could be earmarked for any needed match from other funding sources.

"All of downtown meets the (CDBG) criteria," she said.

The Hoffman building is owned by the Boston-based Rochshire Trust, and the agent of that entity, Phillip Haughey, attended the Aug. 3 meeting.

Pollard said then that the city was in negotiations with Haughey to work out the details of a 10-year lease. The city's present position is that if they obtain state or federal funding to rehab the building, the value of the improvements would be set against any potential leasing costs.