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Showcase brings contractors together

"We want to link businesses in Southwest Virginia with businesses in Northern Virginia for strategic business partnerships."

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A Radford organization is helping local companies get a piece of some lucrative government contracts - by introducing the companies to their Northern Virginia counterparts.

Called Virginia's Linked Workforce Showcase, it has been run for the past three years by Radford-based Virginia Economic Bridge. The latest event was at the end of March in Tysons Corner, where it brought together 16 "prime contractors" from Northern Virginia and nine Southwest Virginia companies.

Participants from up north included an alphabet soup of technology companies - AT&T, CGI-AMS, CSC, for starters - as well as the likes of Lockheed Martin and Unisys. Companies from down south included G3 Systems from Roanoke, Vision Point Systems from Blacksburg and CornerPost Software from Duffield.

For Bill Hume, president of Roanoke-based Interactive Design, the showcase was a way to make contacts a lot more efficiently with some Northern Virginia companies.

"We do a lot of knocking on doors between Roanoke and the capital," he explained. "This provided a really good opportunity to knock on 10 doors at one time."

The focus of this year's showcase was the federal budget - specifically, helping Southwest Virginia companies get a piece of that growing pie.

Although major government contracts themselves often are secured by Northern Virginia companies, which have years of experience in snaring them, those companies need to subcontract - hopefully to businesses in the other end of the state.

But don't think of it as rich city folk tossing bones to their country cousins, said Theresa Knox, project manager for the showcase.

"No one should get the idea that they have to help out Southwest Virginia," she said. "There are very sophisticated companies here that the Northern Virginia companies are delighted to have an intro to."

Mindy Scott, director of contracts administration for Alexandria-based Calibre, which develops technology and management tools, said her company appreciates keeping things within the Old Dominion.

"It's nice to see businesses within the state of Virginia that we can subcontract to," she said. "You always like to keep the money within the state - as close to home as you can."

The goal of Virginia Economic Bridge has been just that, as its name implies.

"We want to bridge the region," Knox said. "We want to link businesses in Southwest Virginia with businesses in Northern Virginia for strategic business partnerships."

VEB started in 1999, when, according to company president and chief executive Carl Mitchell, "a lot of the Northern Virginia companies kept saying that they could not find employees, particularly in the IT [information technology] arena."

Mitchell knew exactly where those companies could find what they needed: about four hours to the south. "The state as a whole has those individuals," he said, "but they're in Roanoke and west because of the quality of life."

But first, Mitchell had to convince Northern Virginia companies that there really was gold - figuratively, anyway - in the hills to the southwest. "The biggest barrier has been overcoming the misperception that we [don't] have the capabilities in this region," he said. "We may be in a region that is socio-economically distressed, but we're not so far removed from the world that we don't have companies with phenomenal, talented employees."

It turns out that being in a "socio-economically distressed" region can be good for local business. That's because government contractors are required to meet certain quotas in their subcontractors, including those in economically disadvantaged areas called HUBZones. (The contractors also may have to subcontract with a certain number of women-, minority- and veteran-owned businesses.)

HUBZones, or "Historically Underutilized Business Zones," were established by the federal government to encourage businesses to move to areas that are economically stagnant, or worse. In exchange for helping to revitalize an area, the government requires its contractors to hire a certain number of HUBZone-certified businesses. Many parts of the Roanoke and Blacksburg areas are part of a HUBZone, including much of downtown Roanoke and the entire Corporate Research Center at Virginia Tech. Companies looking for HUBZone certification need to file the appropriate paperwork with the government.

HUBZones are nationwide; contractors can fulfill the requirement with a subcontractor from New York or California. That's where VEB and the Linked Workforce Showcase come in.

By providing those Northern Virginia companies with not only a list of Southwest Virginia businesses, but also with the requirements those businesses meet (minority owned, HUBZone, etc.), VEB makes it simpler for them to subcontract to a company within the state. The alternative is to go through a lot of proposals and a lot of Web sites to see who provides what.

"The folks that put this together actually went out and sought out companies and ... gave them a look-see ahead of time," said Scott. "You're not bombarded with hordes of companies that you have to sift through."

Besides playing matchmakers, Mitchell and company are also playing teacher.

On this end of the state they're helping local companies get on the contractors' short lists.

"We've been educating these Southwest Virginia businesses that they need to certify their companies," Mitchell said. "They need to market outside of the region and look beyond their geographical boundaries."

And up in Northern Virginia, VEB is showing the Northern Virginia companies that there are qualified subcontractors in their backyard.

"It's been a five-year educational process on both ends," Mitchell said.

It can take years for even the best-matched companies to end up working together. But VEB can point to some successes. For example, Tazewell-based Thompson & Litton is working on solidifying a partnership with Centex Construction Co. of Fairfax, and Blacksburg-based DataLink has entered into a deal with Macronetics in Vienna. Virginia Economic Bridge ±

Mission: To promote the economic vitality and external competitiveness of the Commonwealth through business, industry and educational partnerships between Southwestern Virginia, Northern Virginia and other areas of the Commonwealth.

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