Greenhouse cluster springs up with aid of UT, BGSU researchers

By Deanna Woolf

"With farmers and growers, if you have an idea and they think it's good, it's a go," said Dick Bostdorff, owner of Bostdorff Greenhouse Acres in Bowling Green, Ohio.

And area growers saw a good idea in October 2004.

Dr. Neil Reid, associate professor of geography and planning and interim director of the UT Urban Affairs Center, and Dr. Mike Carroll, director of the Bowling Green State University Center for Regional Development, had returned from England where they studied clusters, which are geographic groups of interconnected companies in a particular industry.

"We got the idea for a greenhouse cluster and got five or six growers together to pitch it to them," Carroll said. They also received funding from the U.S. Department of Agriculture to support the implementation of the cluster.

And what did the growers think? "I right away was excited about it," said Tom Wardell, owner of Wardell's Farm Market in Waterville, Ohio. "When I heard about the cluster program, it's like a dream come true. More than that, we've got professors from two universities, bringing in people from the Regional Growth Partnership — all sorts of professional people with knowledge."

Nearly two years after that initial meeting, the 25-plus-member cluster is going strong and has taken the name Maumee Valley Growers. Reid and Carroll will present about the project at the 2006 International Geographic Union Commission on the Dynamics of Economic Spaces in New Zealand at the end of this month.

"Where we are today compared to where we were even a year ago, we've made huge strides," Reid said. Carroll agreed, "We haven't seen anything where the design of this program is flawed. Everything we thought would happen is more or less happening."

The cluster is organized around a champion, the person who visits the greenhouse owners and identifies issues; a project manager, responsible for the logistics of getting the issues solved; and an advisory board, which serves as the vision and strategy team for the cluster. However, it is the growers on the board who have the final say on decisions made. "This is a bottom-up organization, driven by the growers themselves," Bostdorff said. "Mike and Neil basically are listeners. They're not coming out and saying we need to do this or this. They're letting the growers say that and then doing something to help the growers solve the problem."

The first major effort has been developing the Maumee Valley Growers' identity and slogan "Choose the very best" to advertise in the local papers. "This is typical of how we want people to recognize us in the area. It's a group effort and our greenhouses really do produce the very best," Bostdorff said.

Wardell hopes the marketing campaign raises awareness of the family-owned greenhouses. "We still have people that have come here for years ask, 'When's the truck come in with the flowers?' We grow everything here," he said. "Sometimes, the public and elected officials are kind of blacked out as to what's going on. The greenhouse industry in northwest Ohio is big."

Indeed, the U.S. Census of Agriculture shows that Lucas County ranks in the top 4 percent nationally in terms of the value of production of greenhouse produce. "It's about a $100 million industry in northwest Ohio," Reid said. Carroll noted the greenhouses employ a large number of people for their size. Wardell said he employs eight workers during peak times, while Bostdorff employs 14 to 16.

Now that the growers are busy for the spring and summer planting seasons, Reid and Carroll are working on more projects for the cluster to tackle, such as energy and insurance costs. "For the greenhouses in northwest Ohio, the energy those places suck up is phenomenal," Reid said. They surveyed growers about their propane use and are waiting to hear back from a provider about a collective or bulk propane purchase.

And for insurance, "we're looking for kind of an umbrella policy," Carroll said. "If we get 80 growers together, they have more bargaining power than each individual grower who has to negotiate their own insurance. All the little things add to the bottom line."

"I think the future for our group — the sky's kind of the limit. Any problems we run into that we can collectively solve will be a big plus," Wardell said.

"It's going to take a couple of years for things to meld together," Bostdorff said. "We're having a good year this year, most of us are really busy. If we can pull more people into the greenhouses and plant centers, it's good for the people and good for us."

Photo by Sue Wuest

BLOOM ROOM: Flowers abound at Barrows Greenhouse, which is a member of the Maumee Valley Growers.

Photo by Daniel Miller

A succulent plant raised by the Maumee Valley Growers