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## Forman passes the rural economic development baton after long career

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By **Mike Flynn**

Washington has been more attuned than most states to the reality that creating successful economies in rural communities results from helping them grow and nurture what they have rather than merely trying to attract businesses from elsewhere to relocate.

Now as Maury Forman, the man who built this state's image of focusing on rural economic development for nearly 26 years, passes the baton, a new program aimed at attracting successful urban entrepreneurs to mentor rural business people is seen by his successor as a "priority program" for the future.

Recruitment and retention, generally in that order, have been the key words that guided the programs of economic development organizations in smaller communities across the country for years, usually with marginal success. But retention has been a generally amorphous patchwork.



Maury Forman



Forman, who has served under five governors, a similar number of department heads and in an agency that has occasionally changed names to connote sometimes different emphasis, is retiring from the role he stepped into in 1991 and soon thereafter began crafting a rural-support image for the state.

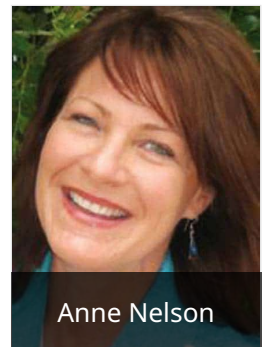
And his vision for rural enhancement has grown over the years, coming to emphasize the importance of entrepreneurs and more recently the importance of young people to their communities.

He once shared with me the view that if programs are to enhance local economic development they “must nurture the belief that young people who grow up in rural communities can be guided to start businesses in their own community rather than moving to urban centers.”

“Just as young people are looking at new ways to enter the work force other than working for someone else, so too are communities looking for ways other than recruitment of businesses from elsewhere to grow their economies,” Forman told me in an interview last year.

### **New leadership**

Now Forman is turning over the role of guiding rural communities on successful economic development paths to Anne Nelson, who has started several businesses and worked as a community and economic developer before becoming an instructor at Walla Walla Community College in business, entrepreneurship and marketing.



Anne Nelson

In an example of Forman’s typical sense of humor, he says “she will essentially be serving those rural areas as Executive Innovator and Enlightener of Ideas Officer (or EIEIO as we say on the farm).”

In fact, Nelson shared with me an incident in the eastern Washington community of Dayton that she thinks may serve as a model for what she hopes will emerge as urban-rural mentoring.

Seems a much-loved bakery in Dayton was closing because the owner was retiring. Nelson heard discussion about it at a local restaurant, was aware of a young woman who was hoping to someday own a restaurant, and created a contact with retired Seattle restaurant owner Paul



as owner manager of the bakery.

“I see the support for that young, aspiring bakery owner from Paul MacKay as a model we can see more and more of across this state,” Nelson said. “The key is that rural entrepreneurs are clear about their sense that mentoring is even more important than capital.”

The program, called Startup365, has been running for about a year under the management of Greater Spokane Inc., the region’s chamber of commerce, aimed at connecting Spokane area business people as mentors for entrepreneurs and small businesses in Asotin and Whitman counties.

But Nelson says Startup 365, created by the Legislature, is aimed at retaining the intellectual wealth and economic vitality of rural areas by focusing on entrepreneurship and small business growth. “That will help communities flourish organically and will be a priority program that I can spend more time on, functioning a large part of my time in Walla Walla,” she said.

“I do believe that urban-rural mentorship will be a key piece in building rural businesses, especially as I see the urban entrepreneurs being more in touch with the technologies and tools that help businesses be successful,” said Nelson.

## **Global entrepreneurship**

One of those technology tools, Skype, she hopes will be employed at least once a week in connecting rural entrepreneurs with their urban mentors. The Spokane program is being supported by Avista, the Spokane-based utility that has a long track record of supporting business development in the region.

But before Nelson gets to focus on developing the urban-rural mentorship idea, her first order of business will be overseeing in November the fifth annual Global Entrepreneurship Week activities in all 39 counties.

Although in Washington, the annual celebration of innovators and job creators involving 88 countries last year became Global Entrepreneurship Month. Nowhere is GEW, or GEM in this state, treated as a bigger deal than what Forman put in place in Washington, which is the only state with events in all counties.



Schultz, of Effingham, Illinois, whose Agracel Inc. is the largest industrial development company focused on developing projects and creating jobs in rural towns, told me he had not heard of a mentorship program like Startup 365.

But Schultz, who said he has long been an admirer of Forman's, said "I think it makes a lot of sense and is something very innovative."

Referring to findings from his visits to hundreds of small towns to gather information for his book, Schultz said in an email: "Embracing entrepreneurship in communities was a key factor which differentiated great communities from also-rans. Increasingly, we are seeing those great communities taking it a step up by tying their local entrepreneurs up with their young people, educating them on both entrepreneurship and also the great things happening in the private sector of their towns."

*Mike Flynn is the former publisher of the Puget Sound Business Journal in Seattle. He writes a weekly column, "Flynn's Harp," that goes to business leaders and elected officials, mostly in Washington state.*

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