



Guillermo Martin, treasurer of the La Surena Cooperative, points out some of the crops being grown at the LSC last month.

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The Latino Economic Development Center is looking to expand business opportunities for area Latinos

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There's a field just south of Woodson Kindergarten Center. Crops of all types grow there, on about an acre of land.

Hope also grows in that field, as six Latino farmers from the area banded together to form an agricultural cooperative to grow those crops this summer.

Those six farmers were aided by the Latino Economic Development Center, a Minneapolis-based nonprofit which has started several similar agribusiness co-ops throughout the state.

Yet Austin is getting a bit more attention than other communities. The LEDC looks to bring more business opportunities to Greater Minnesota through Austin, which will serve as the first outstate business center for the nonprofit. The move not only will help Latinos along the Interstate 90 corridor — it serves as another sign of Austin's continued economic growth.

“It clearly represents some substantial change and favorable opportunity,” local business expert George Brophy said.



Victor Contreras, with The Latino Economic Development Center, talks with Mary Holtorf, left, and Tessa Donato of Lingua One during a recent open house for the La Surena Cooperative site near Woodson Kindergarten Center.
Eric Johnson/photodesk@austindailyherald.com

Starting from scratch

At first, the Latino Economic Development Center didn't know there was a need for their services in Austin, Minnesota. The group, which started in 1994, made its name in the Twin Cities area by creating networks for Latino businesses and spearheading developments such as Mercado Central, the famous Minneapolis Latino shopping complex.

Since then, the group has helped businesses from around the state and took particular interest in agribusiness opportunities.

Over the past few years, LEDC staff have helped agricultural co-ops start in New Richland, Long Prairie, and Madelia. Since their start, several of those co-ops have grown from an acre or two of crops to almost 100 acres of farmland.

Yet the LEDC hadn't thought about extending the program to Austin until area leaders, combined with Riverland Community College, asked the center to host a business workshop in Austin last summer.

It seemed there was plenty of interest.

“As I was sitting there, just observing the class, I was hearing a lot of people say they were interested in agriculture,” Jake Vela, executive director of the Welcome Center of Austin, said. “I don't know if LEDC had thought about doing that.”

From there, LEDC officials met with area farmers who were interested in the LEDC's agribusiness program to start co-ops in Austin and Owatonna. Along the way, the center has helped connect those co-ops with other business opportunities, according to Mario Hernandez, LEDC vice president.

LEDC staff paired the La Surena Cooperative, Austin's co-op, with an area Latino marketing firm to connect the farmers with potential clients.

“That's one of the things we do, that's why we feel that engaging businesses in the community with these sorts of business opportunities is necessary,” Hernandez said.

The next step

La Surena, LEDC staff, and area leaders celebrated the co-op's first year of success on June 25 with a tour of La Surena's crops.

Yet area leaders have another reason to celebrate soon, as the LEDC looks to open its first-ever satellite office in Greater Minnesota here in Austin.

“There is just this energy that’s there, so we wanted to, in essence continue the momentum,” Hernandez said.

The LEDC has helped between 10 to 15 businesses along the I-90 corridor over the years, which prompted LEDC staff to consider a satellite office in southern Minnesota to offer business advice and small loan help.

More than 3,800 Latinos live in Austin alone, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, and the community has become more diverse over the years. Many area Latinos, from immigrants to longtime residents, also come from agricultural backgrounds.

“It’s another type of income for them,” Miguel Garate, international student advisor at Riverland Community Center, said. “They’re looking for a place to start their own business.”

That’s why the LEDC decided to open an office in Austin. In addition, local volunteers including Garate, Vela, representatives from Hormel Foods Corp. and the city of Austin, will come together as part of an advisory committee for the office.

“Part of the goal for us is to make sure the community conditions are fertile for entrepreneur development,” Hernandez said.

The LEDC is still looking for committee members and working to open an office. Yet the office means more opportunities for area entrepreneurs to get their businesses off the ground.

“This is a fantastic way to get our immigrant community members engaged with the business side,” Vela said. “And I think that LEDC has a really great model. They have proven success.”

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