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Carroll Tomorrow receives \$250,000 federal grant to create regional Makerspace

CARROLLTON, GA – The Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC) has awarded Carroll Tomorrow a \$250,000 grant to create The Tinker's Box, an innovation laboratory that provides shared space, equipment and tools for product prototyping and testing for regional inventors to collaborate and develop concepts and ideas.

The Tinker's Box will be housed in The Burson Center, Carroll Tomorrow's business incubator and regional business resource hub for West Georgia entrepreneurs. The ARC grant will be matched with funds committed by the Development Authority of Carroll County (DACC) totaling another \$250,000 to support construction costs and to equip the lab.

Congressman Lynn Westmoreland was instrumental in garnering the funding for the makerspace at the federal level. "I have had the opportunity to utilize The Burson Center on a number of occasions and see the outstanding work that is being done there," Westmoreland said.

Donna Armstrong-Lackey, Senior Vice President of Carroll Tomorrow and The Burson Center Executive Director, along with incubator manager Lauren Holverson, will serve as The Tinker's Box staff. The Tinker's Box Core Planning Team, comprised of 21 technology/engineering professionals, students, economic developers, and business leaders focused on promoting innovation in the region, is in place.

"Makerspaces exist across the state of Georgia and throughout the country and are defined as places where like-minded individuals gather to work on personal projects, share tools, and offer expertise as well as learn from each other," Armstrong-Lackey said. "West Georgia has created a strong entrepreneurial ecosystem that supports these innovators to pursue their ideas which leads to economic growth."

The makerspace will be open to makers on a membership basis in the seven-county service area currently served by the incubator: Carroll, Coweta, Douglas, Haralson, Heard, Paulding and Polk.

The Burson Center began exploring the makerspace program as a natural expansion of the current offerings at the incubator by supplying the innovation infrastructure to promote new business development and job creation.

"Now product development and business incubation will be even more aligned creating an all-in-one package for inventors wishing to carry their products to commercialization," stated Holverson.

The Tinker's Box will be constructed within the existing warehouse space of The Burson Center. This 2,536 square foot area will provide workstations, computer kiosks, lab tables, and related equipment and tools for inventors, and technology developers to construct, experiment and test products focused on electronics, robotics, computers, software, digital art and materials science.

A makerspace promotes and encourages creative thinking and allows the community to enhance their technological skills through hands-on experience. The Tinker's Box will be a technology-focused makerspace and already has an extensive support base within the community such as West Georgia Technical College, University of West Georgia, West Georgia Regional Library System, the Small Business Development Center, and Georgia Tech.

The Burson Center will develop "making" programs that will be accessible to business owners, students and industry leaders. Once operational, student participation will be encouraged and through The Tinker's Box programming, timeless skills such as curiosity, problem-solving, collaboration, creativity and the ability to learn on one's own will help prepare students for their future careers.

The renovation of The Burson Center warehouse space is expected to begin Fall 2016, with furnishing and equipment installation to immediately follow. A Hackathon, an inventors workshop, will kick-off the grand opening for the community in the new year.

Projected equipment needs have been determined through surveys of identified makers in The Tinker's Box service area, and users will complete a Basic Skills and Safety class for each piece of equipment before they can use it.

"Another exciting aspect is the interest from our local industry," Armstrong-Lackey said. "We have developed a broad list of industry users and volunteers interested in sharing knowledge and collaborating on innovative projects."

"It is commendable that Carroll Tomorrow and other community leaders are prepared to take this bold step in expanding the entrepreneurial and innovative footprint of west Georgia," said Tom Sammon, project manager for Georgia Tech's Enterprise Innovation Institute and partner in The Tinker's Box implementation.

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