

Athens, OH – Southeast Ohio Community Entrepreneurship Program

Location: Athens, OH and the Southeast Ohio Region

Venue: Ohio University

Intro to the City, Distinctive Aspects and Demographics:

Athens, Ohio, population 23,849, serves as the cultural and educational hub of Southeastern Ohio. It is home to Ohio University, one of the oldest public universities in the United States, which significantly influences the city's economy and culture. The region benefits from a dynamic mix of industries, including education, healthcare, tourism, and small-scale manufacturing. Athens is known for its vibrant arts and music scene, outdoor recreation opportunities, and a growing reputation for local and sustainable food production. Southeastern Ohio, including Athens, is recognized for its natural beauty, affordability, and tight-knit community atmosphere.

Financial and Business Resources - Athens fosters a growing entrepreneurial ecosystem anchored by Ohio University's Innovation Center, a business incubator that has supported over 300 businesses since its founding in 1983. The Innovation Center provides access to office and lab space, mentorship, and networking opportunities. Regional support organizations, such as Rural Action and ACEnet (the Appalachian Center for Economic Networks), assist local entrepreneurs, particularly those in the food, agriculture, and sustainability sectors. These organizations offer resources like microloans, co-working spaces, and market access initiatives. Athens County is also part of Ohio's Third Frontier initiative, which has provided funding for technology startups and business support services across the state.

Regional Assets - Athens, OH is in the southeast portion of the state and part of the Appalachian region. Regional assets include a number of great national and regional higher education institutions, low/affordable cost of living, and beautiful surroundings.

Workforce - The twelve counties of southeast Ohio adjacent/proximate to Athens are home to approximately 300,000 people aged 16 and over. At the end of 2018, unemployment in the region was 7.7% compared to 4.5% across the state of Ohio. The Appalachian region covers more than 39% of the state, following the eastern and southern borders. The area is scarcely populated, with about 125 persons per square mile compared with 388 in the rest of the state (2017 American community survey). Appalachian Ohio counties that this program hopes to serve (~ 10 of the 32) include small cities, villages, small unincorporated communities, rural farmland, and industrial areas (mostly along the Ohio River). Historically identified as economically depressed and geographically isolated, the Appalachian region has been home to self-reliant and independent people with strong ties to land, community, and family. In Ohio's 32 Appalachian counties, about 17.6 percent of adults 25 years and older have earned a bachelors degree or higher, which is lower than 27.2 percent statewide.



Financial and Business Resources - In July 2019, the Governors Office of Appalachia (GOA) piloted a STEM Camp in partnership with Buckeye Hills and Building Bridges to Careers at Marietta College. The camp offered students in the area a chance to explore CAD/CAM software, electronic/programming, 3D printing, CNC laser cutting, and using industrial manufacturing equipment. The Local Development Districts (LDDs) received funding for workforce development and job training in state fiscal years 2018 and 2019. This was the first time the LDDs received funds specifically for regional job training needs. The LDDs created new and strengthened existing partnerships with the local Workforce Investment Boards, training centers, and schools to administer the funds. These partnerships continue to create job training projects that will be submitted to Appalachian Regional Development Commission (ARC) and GOA for funding. The LIGHTS Regional Innovation Network, founded by Ohio University, is designed to strengthen the economies of coal impacted communities in Appalachia. LIGHTS help spark innovation and support entrepreneurship. The programs goals include creating high-wage jobs and attracting more significant private investment in the region. LIGHTS received ARC funding to provide direct assistance to startups and assist communities in developing business incubators.

Infrastructure - US Senator Sherrod Brown recently announced that the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) had awarded the state of Ohio a little over \$18 million in highway formula funding for the Appalachian Development Highway System to help fund improvements to designated corridors in the Appalachian region of Ohio. This project will further develop the network of 33 corridors throughout the Appalachian region to help connect these areas to the interstate highway system. This new funding means additional opportunities to expand the highway system throughout Appalachian, Ohio. It will unlock resources for infrastructure investments and spur economic growth for many communities that often get left on their own.

Underserved Communities: In 2018, the unemployment rate was 5.4 percent in Ohio's Appalachian region, while Ohio's overall rate was 4.6 percent. The median household income in Ohio's Appalachian region was \$46,023 compared with \$52,407 statewide. Appalachian counties have the states highest poverty rates, with Ohio's 11 most impoverished counties in the region. In Appalachian counties, 15.7 percent of workers travel 45 minutes or more to work compared with 11.3 percent statewide.

Program Administration:

The program is hosted by The Ohio University Center for Entrepreneurship which was launched in 2011. It operates in a unique partnership between the College of Business and the Voinovich School for Leadership and Public Service to be a university-wide resource providing curricular, co-curricular, and community programming. In 2015, USASBE (United States Association for Small Business and Entrepreneurship) recognized the Center as a top emerging program in the country. Curricular offerings include a major in the College of Business, a certificate available to anyone outside of the College of Business, an honors program, and a stackable business venturing certificate available in several graduate programs. Co-curricular offerings include several notable industry events such as the Music Industry Summit and Business of Games, the Bobcat Seed Fund, and Startup Weekend.

