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## **Backing business: Community assistance program lends expertise to start-ups**

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**EASTHAMPTON** - Before they opened their secondhand clothing store on Main Street, sisters Rachel and Jill Tarr needed a plan.

So they went to the Valley Community Development Corporation, which offers free information and advice to small businesses through a contract with the city.

Director of small business development Gene R. Talsky, they said, was 'invaluable.'

'He gave us a ton of information,' Jill Tarr said. 'He was so helpful in formulating the idea and the cash flow and the business plan.'

The Tarrs opened their new store Back on the Rack last week.

'We probably would not have been able to put all the numbers together without him,' Rachel Tarr said.

It has been more than a year since the Valley CDC reopened its doors to city business people in need of advice and technical assistance.

Through a 15-month contract secured with the city in September of 2005, the Valley CDC offers free business counseling to start-ups and small, existing businesses.

The \$135,000 community development block grant came through the state's Ready Resources Grant program.

Since reopening in the Eastworks Building on Pleasant Street, the Valley CDC has helped more than 50 Easthampton businesspeople, according to Talsky.

'This time we're more committed to stay,' he said. 'I think this time it's going to work.'

The Valley CDC offered business counseling from 1998 to 1999 in the Eastworks Building, then from 2002 to 2004 on Cottage Street.

A lack of funding forced them to close down after those stints.

'It was significantly less funding in the past,' said city grants coordinator Ellen Koteen. She added that the Planning Department is already preparing to write its proposal for next year grant.

An economic stimulus package from the state for up to \$75,000 could also help fund the business technical assistance program, Koteen said.



KEVIN GUTTING

Owners Rachel and Jill Tarr greet customers at the grand opening of their store, Back on the Rack, which opened in Easthampton recently with advice from the Valley Community Development Corporation.

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The Valley CDC applied for the grant last month.

'That would carry them through June,' Koteen said.

Talsky said that he is encouraged by the business climate in the city. 'I think that Easthampton is ideal right now,' he said. 'The city is very proactive in trying to help business.'

Talsky said that his clients also give him hope for the future of the program.

'It's very exciting because they're very bright, energetic people and a lot of them have good ideas,' he said. 'These people leave here really on fire.'

Todd Denis, owner of Pizza, Wings, and Things, called Talsky 'very dedicated.'

Talsky and Denis chatted about several business matters, Denis said.

'It's an untapped resource in Easthampton that business owners should look to,' he said.

Talsky said that the two key ingredients to success in business are focus and commitment.

'The focus we can help with but we don't really provide personal counseling,' he said.

Talsky, who has opened four businesses himself, said that those looking to start a business in Easthampton or want assistance with their existing business are wise to seek help.

'It's very tough to finance a startup,' he said. 'If they're going to have a chance, it's much better working with us than trying it on your own.'

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