



Help from SBDC available
to variety of businesses.
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SBDC is common stop for S.D. companies

SMRTGrid is good example of network's creative business clients

When power poles get damaged or knocked down in storms, utility crews scramble to fix them. But first they have to locate the problem. In some instances, finding a downed pole requires crew members to drive around at night and look with spotlights.

Surprising as it might seem, technology commonly used in the power industry does not automatically pinpoint the location of problem poles on some kind of centralized monitor.

SMRTGrid Inc., a startup business based in Baltic, S.D., is addressing the gap in technology. The company has developed an electronic sensing device that makes problems in a company's electrical grid easy to locate.

"It's a device that you put on top of an electrical pole," says Ryan Van Zee, CEO of SMRTGrid. "If that pole wiggles, falls down or loses electricity, it will send a text to a smart device with a warning and a link to show where the problematic pole is located on a map, with directions on how to get to it."

The device is small – about six inches by six inches – and includes a circuit board and an antenna. Electric companies could place a box on every pole or space them out to reduce potential search areas. Locating the devices just on remote poles in rural areas would be a big help for finding problems, Van Zee said.

SMRTGrid was among the SBDC's clients that participated this year in the Governor's Giant Vision Business Competition in South Dakota. In fact, most of the businesses that were finalists and placed in the competition were clients of the SBDC or one of its affiliated offices.

In 2016, 89 percent of the finalists and 80 percent of the winners in the competition were SBDC clients. The results were similar in 2015.

BlueDop Medical of Sioux Falls won first place and the top prize of \$20,000 this year. BlueDop is a client of Small Business Innovation Research program, which is part of the SBDC network. The second-, third- and fourth-place finishers also were SBDC clients. Eight of the nine companies named as finalists in this year's competition also were SBDC clients.

SMRTGrid was a finalist but didn't place in the top five, which is an indicator of the high level of competition in the statewide contest.

"Our business consultants take great pride in how their clients do in the competition," said Jeff Eckhoff, state director of the SBDC.

Organizations such as the South Dakota Chamber of Commerce & Industry, which hosts the annual Giant Vision competition, are aware of the services provided to new businesses by the SBDC network and help to spread the word, Eckhoff said.

Dr. Gary Archambault, director of SBIR program in South Dakota, said the SBIR program works with a lot technology-based start-ups. He encourages them to compete in contests to refine their strategies as well as possibly win money.

In addition to getting help with SBIR grant applications from Archambault of the Sioux Falls SBDC office, Lori Cowman and Sue Stoll, consultants from the SBDC regional office in Yankton, helped SMRTGrid with its business plan. "Everyone was very helpful," Van Zee said.

SMRTGrid has developed a unique product that potentially has global reach, Archambault said. There are approximately 170 million power poles just in the United States. "They're addressing a unique and large opportunity," he said.

Van Zee, who is also the director of the Kelley Center for Entrepreneurship at Dakota Wesleyan University in Mitchell, developed the sensing product along with his business partner, Todd Christensen, who is a technology architect in the financial service industry.

An application for a patent for the SMRTGrid product is pending, Van Zee said. In addition, arrangements have been made with an energy company to test the product, and a manufacturing company has been lined up to produce it.

SMRTGrid also has talked to sales representatives, but the company needs to complete a successful product demonstration before starting marketing, Van Zee said. The devices are expected to cost about \$350 each and last about 10 years.

"It's a pretty complete solution, we think," Van Zee said.

About the SBDC

For more about the South Dakota SBDC and its affiliated offices, see www.sdbusinesshelp.com.

The SBDC has regional offices in Aberdeen, Pierre, Rapid City, Sioux Falls, Watertown and Yankton, and satellite offices in Brookings and Mitchell. Other programs in the SBDC network include South Dakota Manufacturing & Technology Solutions, South Dakota Procurement Technical Assistance Centers, South Dakota International Trade Center, Small Business Innovation Research programs and the Enterprise Institute. The SBDC network is an outreach program of the Beacom School of Business at the University of South Dakota.

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