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## Auction Inn concept sells in York

*Lancaster nonprofit mapping expansion beyond midstate*

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Central Penn Business Journal Staff

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A company formed through an innovative arrangement with a Lancaster nonprofit group expects its new partnership with a York charity to be the first step toward growth nationwide.

Auction Inn is teaming with Bell Socialization Services Inc. to open an eBay trading post in late summer at 405 Carlisle Ave. in York. Formed in 2004 in partnership with the Boys & Girls Club of Lancaster, Auction Inn sells items on eBay.com, the popular online auction Web site for nonprofit groups, private individuals and companies.

As it gets the new location off the ground, Auction Inn is considering how to expand its model beyond Central Pennsylvania, said Bob Musser, the company's president. The company has attracted attention from several other nonprofit organizations, including Boys & Girls Clubs in Allentown and Erie.

Auction Inn's growth plans come as many charities attempt to become more entrepreneurial to further their missions and improve their bottom lines in the face of increased competition for funding. Nonprofit groups can embrace this concept, often referred to as "social enterprise," in many ways, including selling merchandise, investing in real estate and partnering with for-profit entities.

"Nonprofits need to learn how to support themselves," Musser said.

The York trading post will be operated by Auction Inn-York, a joint venture between Auction Inn and Bell Placement Services. Bell Placement is a subsidiary of Bell Socialization Services, which provides mental-health, mental-retardation and shelter services in York and Adams counties. Any profits the post makes will go back to its owners.

The post will operate much like Auction Inn's full-service location at 241 W. Lemon St. in Lancaster. Individuals, nonprofit groups and businesses will be able to drop off their items for Auction Inn staff to photograph and try to sell on eBay. Auction Inn sold about \$1 million in merchandise in 2005 and expects to sell at least \$2 million in merchandise this year, Musser said.

Auction Inn will provide initial management oversight at the York location and help hire its staff. The firm also will train Bell clients who will work at the York location. The goal is to help Bell get the site fully operational within a year, Musser said. The site eventually could employ 15 to 20 people, up to half of them Bell clients.

Bell wanted to partner with Auction Inn because the company provides a way for Bell clients to learn skills — such as digital photography, packaging and customer service — that they can take to other jobs, said Tony Schweitzer, the nonprofit group's assistant director of mental-health services. Auction Inn-York also will help the nonprofit organization form new relationships with businesses that could employ Bell clients.

Bell already has some experience running a business operation. About four years ago, it partnered with York Habitat for Humanity to open Re-Stor-York, a store that sells new and used building materials.

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Auction Inn will monitor the success of its York trading post. The company is not yet sure whether pursuing additional joint ventures is the best approach as it grows geographically, Musser said. It is considering whether starting franchises would be better.

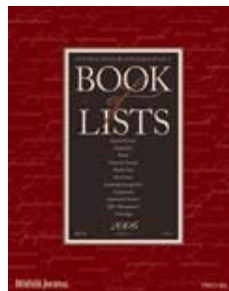
"We want to get this one off the ground first and then entertain other facilities," he said.

Nonprofit groups must consider several questions before pursuing a social-enterprise activity, said Andy Horsnell, senior associate with the Toronto office of Rolfe Larson Associates, a consulting firm that specializes in helping nonprofits generate more income. These questions include whether a particular business venture is in line with the group's strategic plan and whether the group's senior management and board support the venture.

Horsnell expects the social-enterprise trend to maintain steady growth as charities approach business ventures more wisely. When the trend became hot a few years ago, some groups rushed headlong into the concept because they believed it would provide a quick way to generate extra revenue. Now, many organizations take a more pragmatic approach, realizing that the ventures often take time to pay off.

"They know that it won't be the be all end all for them," Horsnell said.

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