



Business

Building R.I.'s innovation economy

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By Jeff Seemann and Clyde Briant

Sometimes we forget to celebrate our most important victories — the times when our political leaders come together, and work together, to make Rhode Island stronger. It is these little victories that can add up to make Rhode Island an extraordinary place.

Many Rhode Islanders might not even know it, but Rhode Island's leadership came together in 2006 and took strong bipartisan action to accelerate the state's economic growth. When it comes to building a 21st-century innovation economy in Rhode Island — the kind of economy that produces good jobs and a better quality of life for all Rhode Islanders — we made progress in 2006.

We are set up for success again in 2007. Certainly, there will be many challenges during this year's legislative session. Before we address the possibilities that lie ahead, let us first take a short pause to celebrate what we have accomplished.

In 2006, the Rhode Island Science and Technology Advisory Council (STAC) released an initial set of recommendations for actions to support and grow an innovation economy in Rhode Island. With strong support from Governor Carcieri, Senate President Joseph Montalbano, Senate Majority Leader Theresa Paiva-Weed, Senate Finance Committee Chair Steven Alves, Sen. William Walaska, House Speaker William Murphy, House Majority Leader Gordon Fox, and House Finance Committee Chair Steven Costantino, STAC's recommendations were well received and supported.

In response to STAC's 2006 recommendations, leadership supported the creation of the Rhode Island Research Alliance, a platform for promoting collaboration, maximizing state and federal investment in research and enhancing the state's R&D-related economic development opportunities.

With support from the governor and General Assembly, STAC launched a new awards program to stimulate collaborative research. These awards made a significant investment in medical, engineering, chemistry, biology, oceanography and environmental science projects led by 32 scientists at 15 Rhode Island research organizations.

Funded projects include collaborations between Brown University and Rhode Island College, the University of Rhode Island and the State Crime Lab, and a unique partnership between Brown University, the Rhode Island School of Design, Hasbro Children's Hospital and Afferent Corp., among others. These projects exemplify the best of what Rhode Island's research organizations can accomplish when we work together, share resources and take advantage of our close connections. This is a strategic investment for Rhode Island.

At STAC's urging, leadership also supported the creation of a new tax credit for investors in Rhode Island-based innovation companies, commissioned a blue-ribbon panel to strengthen research at the University of Rhode Island, and invested in the RI-WINs wireless project — Rhode Island's bid to become the first state in the country with a border-to-border wireless network.

Finally, in collaboration with the Business Innovation Factory, STAC launched a statewide program to enable all of Rhode Island's public high schools to participate in Dean Kamen's FIRST Vex Challenge, a program where student teams build working robots and apply concepts in physics, engineering and computer programming in the real world. On March 31, more than 35 schools will demo their working robots in a statewide competition that brings the same excitement and community enthusiasm to science, technology, engineering and math typically found at school sporting

events.

These important accomplishments would not have been possible without strong bipartisan support.

On Jan. 17, STAC released a second set of recommendations. We believe these recommendations are a responsible way to build on our momentum and continue our progress toward an economy that produces higher wage jobs at every wage level. These recommendations include:

- Renewing \$1.5 million in funding for the Research Alliance's collaborative research award program;
- Supporting the statewide build-out of the RI-WINs network to make Rhode Island the first state in the country with a border-to-border broadband wireless network;
- Providing an annual budget to launch the Rhode Island Information Technology and Digital Media Center as an incubator for the creation and growth of competitive companies in this important sector;
- Creating a new vision for work force development to meet the requirements of a 21st century innovation economy, including a blueprint for educating and training state residents to compete in the global marketplace.

There is no doubt that the enthusiasm for these recommendations is the result of the good will and hard work demonstrated by the state's leadership in 2006. We thank and congratulate them. These successes are just the start, but they are successes we can celebrate and be proud of as we confidently set our sights on future success.

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