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Pathway to Policy Action

N.E. technology groups need to think regionally

By Matthew Nemerson

The technology agenda for 2008 should include a new emphasis on creating a regional approach to efforts to promote our key industries and competitive advantages. A range of issues from Amtrak funding to promoting technology transfer all will benefit from bringing the New England states together from an innovation policy standpoint. Meanwhile, in Connecticut, we are also looking at continued development of, and cooperation among, the many programs designed to help grow early stage companies.

A quick anecdote. Consider a map of Connecticut displayed on TV during the last snowstorm. Pretty-colored layers swept across the state like waves of white, purple and gray. But Massachusetts and Rhode Island were unmarked, green patches with crisp borders alongside Connecticut. There was no indication they were locations that were also hit by the storm.

Was it possible that no one watching lived north or east of our state? Are we now so insular that the weather itself does not extend from Enfield, Conn., to Longmeadow?

Topping the 2008 wish list is the need to increase the global competitiveness of each state by working from the vantage point of all New England and even the Mid-Atlantic states working together as a "mega-region."

Regardless of what the root causes of our relative decline, the slow-growing Northeast is certainly still one of the key sources of innovation and technology for the entire country. It is worth proposing that the organizations representing our key industries jointly reach out to the federal representatives from Maine to Delaware to encourage them to act on competitiveness issues as if they were a regional caucus. Each of our states is too small to go it alone.

We need to include regional efforts aimed at technology transfer, the attraction of experienced entrepreneurs, intra-regional and inter-regional commuter transportation links, retention of our young talent, graduate students and educated immigrants as well as simply increasing the flow of federal grants and research investments.

This effort needs to happen at governors' conferences, but we can try to push it along at a national meeting of technology councils in Washington, D.C., this spring, where the groups from various states around Connecticut are set to meet.

Focus on Connecticut

Looking specifically at Connecticut, 2008 will be the year for progress on the building of a cohesive network of programs and tools promoting innovation growth.

The good news is that the growth of startup concepts continues to be strong. Thanks to a grant from the state, the council is now tracking more than 300 early-stage efforts to see which ones have good potential to grow significantly. As part of our effort we are also affiliating with several angel groups and hoping to work more closely with other clusters such as manufacturing and insurance and financial services.

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Outside of the council's efforts, government investment programs such as those managed by Connecticut Innovations and the state's private angel networks all report consistent interest in their funds and a growing pipeline of stronger startup firms.

We hope to capitalize on this momentum by pushing for adoption of an entrepreneur's tax credit program to provide a powerful incentive for new investments to be made in startups. The success of the Connecticut film tax credit program aimed at luring productions and plans for movie and video studios here ought to give us great ammunition to close the deal on a similar, though smaller, program for technology concepts.

The state's incubator strategy will get attention with a size-able grant to the nonprofit Connecticut Center for Advanced Technology to provide a statewide plan for incubators and the adoption of a standardized system for helping companies in these centers. We will be promoting the idea of new incubator facilities nearer New York, where they are needed.

Finally, new top leadership at our Department of Economic and Community Development and at Connecticut Innovations is poised to provide significant strategic direction and collaboration with key groups. Our DECD chief comes from a successful career in transportation and economic development in New York City and the CI president is that group's former investment director with a great knowledge of the Connecticut early-stage funding situation. With our governor's continuing popularity and an emerging pro-growth attitude in the Legislature, there is a sense that reigniting the state's tradition of innovation leadership is going to be strong agenda item going forward.

As always, we look forward to working with groups across New England to improve our region's ability to compete for and grow quality jobs and firms.

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