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Business Friendly: What Does It Mean For Connecticut?

February 27, 2011 | By KENNETH R. GOSSELIN, kgosselin@courant.com, The Hartford Courant

But that, according to the report, was what business owners wanted the most. One anonymous quote summed up the frustration by the CEOs: "I've had more meetings with Gov. Schwarzenegger [of California] than Gov. Rell."

CEOs expect to deal with executives at the same level at other companies, and that goes for the state of Connecticut, said Matthew Nemerson, the council's president.

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"The culture is, 'at our level we deal with CEOs,'" Nemerson said. "In state government, that's the governor. So that's the game."

Nemerson said it's crucial for the governor to build relationships with business executives before a company faces a crisis or an expansion — so the CEO is comfortable picking up the telephone and calling the governor.

Although it is too soon to tell, Malloy appears to be making moves in that direction, even as he faces a tough road to rein in the state's budget deficit.

"Quite frankly, there is a 180-degree difference between this administration and the last," Nemerson said. "Before, it was that we were just hanging on."

Although the governor is a key player, some experts say the responsibility also must filter down to other state and municipal leaders, said Liddy Karter, executive director of the Connecticut Venture Group, which promotes investments in high-growth industries.

"If we put in place systems so that we can be consistently more outgoing and welcoming to businesses even in times of budget constraints," Karter said, "this is part of marketing one-on-one. We could go a long way to making a name for ourselves by touting our strengths."

The Pfizer Lesson

The layoff of 1,100 at Pfizer's Groton campus over the next 18 months clearly shows how complex the business of being business friendly has become.

The job cuts sting, but Pfizer had technically met — and actually exceeded — the requirements for job creation under the variety of incentive packages totaling well over \$60 million doled out more than a decade ago.

Pfizer also was no longer the company it was when it first got the incentives, largely for the construction of a state-of-the-art research headquarters in New London.

After three mega-mergers, the pharmaceutical giant needed to downsize and shift its research focus to a narrower set of potential drugs. The move was made more pressing by the imminent end of the patent on its star-performing, cholesterol-lowering drug Lipitor.

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Cambridge, the winner in Pfizer's latest restructuring, is in the center of teaching hospitals that collaborate with universities, and it is a hotbed of entrepreneurial drug-research companies. All three are needed for new drug research, Pfizer executives said.

Connecticut should have made a stronger play to keep those jobs in the state — and could have made a persuasive argument, said economist Fred V. Carstensen, director of the Connecticut Center for Economic Analysis at the University of Connecticut.

In West Haven, there is the underutilized former Bayer HealthCare facility, with its 550,000 square feet of laboratory space, now owned by Yale University. The university intends to expand its medical and scientific research operations, at once advancing its academic mission and fostering discoveries that might have commercial potential.

Back in 1999, when Pfizer was growing fast in the state, Connecticut had a shot at forming a then-unusual public-private partnership with the company. Pfizer wanted to build a \$35 million animal vaccine research center on Horsebarn Hill on the UConn campus in Storrs.

Pfizer withdrew amid vociferous opposition from local residents, students and faculty who wanted to preserve the bucolic vista. The drugmaker said its business was changing too rapidly to wait out a long court battle.

Pfizer continued adding jobs in the state, reaching a peak of 6,500 by 2004, but it will fall to 3,500 after the recently announced cuts.

In the past five years, there has been a consistent flow of loans and tax incentive programs to businesses to encourage job growth, with some outright grants. Two major state agencies — the state Department of Economic and Community Development and the Connecticut Development Authority handed out \$176.5 million in loans and loan guarantee and another \$92.4 million in various tax exemptions.

Companies, however, consider the financial incentives the least important part of how a state can render assistance, Carstensen said.

"The things that companies really care about are the ability to hire workers with the skill sets they need, and the ability to get help when they have a problem with a design or how to produce something," Carstensen said.

Brains And Trains

At TopCoder in Glastonbury, Hughes said he has resisted the lure of moving to Silicon Valley in California because he grew up in Connecticut. TopCoder employs 40 and organizes online competitions for computer programmers to solve challenges for governments or firms.

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