

I-91 “Knowledge Corridor” More than a Catch Phrase

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New Englanders might suffer from a few stereotypes: aloof, perhaps, and suspicious of folks from the next town or state down the road.

But economic development experts say those traits, whether real or imagined, aren't helpful in a global marketplace, where well-organized competitors can easily dominate those prone to squabbling.

Since 2000, area businesses and educational institutions have been working to present a unified front to the world, promoting a new, cross-border project called the Knowledge Corridor along Interstate Route 91 from Brattleboro, Vt. to Hartford.

And just as California's Silicon Valley and the Research Triangle in North Carolina gradually be-came known as powerhouses of innovation, officials say their own collaboration is starting to bear fruit in the form of new business ventures and job-creating partnerships.

“I think it's gone beyond the branding stage by now,” said Paul Kostecki, vice provost for research at the University of Massachusetts

He pointed to the thriving Collaborative Biomedical Research program between UMass and Baystate Medical Center in Springfield; the 2002 creation of the Pioneer Valley Life Sciences Institute; and the MassNanoTech center, founded last year to capitalize on the university's leadership in nanotechnology, with more than \$22 million in grant funding since 1996.

“From our point of view, it's working,” Kostecki said.

Another result of the Knowledge Corridor initiative was the Regional Technology Corp., an organization created in 2003 to increase the number of technology- and biotechnology-based businesses in the region.

Keith Parent, chairman-elect of the RTC board, said companies are increasingly forging valuable partnerships along the corridor.

For example, he said, Protedyne Corp., of Windsor, Conn. found that it didn't need to look overseas or out of the region for suppliers. The company specializes in laboratory automation for the biotechnology and pharmaceutical industries.

“They found there were a lot of suppliers up and down the corridor that supply parts for their robot-ics,” said Parent, president and CEO of Court Square Data Group in Springfield.

“There are a lot of companies getting tied together, and a lot of companies saying, ‘How can we make this happen faster?’” he added.

Officials admitted that state and regional boundaries have sometimes made it hard for traditional rivals to collaborate.

“Everyone sees it from their own mountain top,” said Kostecki, an RTC board member.

But in many ways the regional concept is catching on, with some saying the Knowledge Corridor effort, now concentrated in the Springfield-Hartford area, should push north to Brattleboro, Vt.

“This is a Knowledge Corridor with expandable boundaries,” said Timothy Brennan, executive director of the Pioneer Valley Planning Commission. “We shouldn't think about this as hard and rigid.”

In one recent example of such collaboration, Greenfield Community College this week announced a partnership with Marlboro College in Vermont.

Under the new program, students who graduate from GCC with an associate's degree in computer science or information systems can earn a bachelor's degree from the Marlboro College's pioneering online education programs at its Graduate Center in downtown Brattleboro.

Such efforts can help the Knowledge Corridor region to hold on to talented students who might otherwise continue their studies elsewhere, Brennan said.

Companies have also worked to counter that much-lamented "brain drain" by expanding internship opportunities, he said.

"If you capture an intern, your chances of keeping them are high," Brennan said, citing numerous studies. "Here's a way to grow our workforce by (developing) one of our main assets, which are students."

Brennan said a proposed commuter rail line from New Haven to Springfield could provide an enormous boost to the regional economy, allowing workers to commute more easily from homes in the Pioneer Valley.