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Section: City/State
Page: 4A

Tucson's high-tech dreams face hurdles

Citizen Staff Writer

Last of two parts
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Tucson has formidable hurdles to overcome to become the high-tech business hub leaders are striving for to bring high-paying jobs and a thriving economy to town.

Right now, Tucson's economy is driven by tourism, retail and the service industry, bringing with it an abundance of low-paying jobs.

Tucson lacks the specialized **research** facilities, venture capital, a business community solidly behind the visions of civic leaders and a strategic plan to convert its economy.

"I've had all kinds of people say, 'Why bother? We have tried many times and it doesn't work. We're a tourist, low-wage town. Why try?' " Mayor Bob Walkup said. "We've gotta try it. We are not quitting."

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Diane Matsumoto, a software engineer at **Breault Research Organization**, said she sees the number of technical jobs in Tucson growing, but "there are few companies that offer the cutting-edge technology and competitive salary that attracts young engineers. I think the reason that most engineers remain in the Tucson area is because Tucson offers an affordable living environment that can be difficult to find anywhere else."

City Hall and Pima County recently announced creation of a Regional Economic Development Corp. that would combine city and county economic development funding and efforts. The goal is to create a single focused effort to expand, retain and recruit companies, preferably high-tech companies, to Tucson.

Tucson also needs a face-lift, some say.

"Most of high-tech has to sell a location to its employees," Assistant City Manager Karen Thoreson said. "The initial appearance of our community is a detraction. If you come from Phoenix or the Tucson airport you will go through major areas where there's trash and lousy-quality development, where there are no sidewalks. We are used to failure. We accept failure."

And there's the sense of there being "no there, there," to quote Gertrude Stein. "We need to slow the 'urban sprawl' to get ahead," said Michael Stevenson, marketing director at **Breault**, a Tucson optics firm. "The city's footprint is large enough. If Tucson's developers continue building 'out' when they could be building 'up,' it will soon take more than an hour to drive Tucson end to end. That's not going to attract young people, or people of any age."

The business community's sprawling viewpoints on economic development rival those of the urban landscape.

While Mark Zupan was dean at the Eller College of Management at the University of Arizona, he got alumni to buy into his vision and was able to raise \$88 million for the business school. He sees a need for concerted action and leadership for Tucson as a whole.

"There is the 'free rider' problem," said Zupan, dean of the graduate business school at the University of Rochester. "Any time you have a team each person has the inclination to let somebody else do the work."

Private money drives economic development in successful high-tech cities. Walkup acknowledges finding private money in Tucson is difficult.

The question is why aren't they investing, Walkup said. "We've got to make it worth their investment, not in recruiting but in creation. What was wrong with GTEC, companies think, 'Why is it important for my company to help bring in new companies?' There was always (something) pushing against private involvement in investment. Why don't we put private sector money into the creation of new business in Tucson?"

Thoreson thinks better communication about UA and Pima Community College achievements will attract the private sector.

The Regional Economic Development Corp. has the top administrators at the University of Arizona and Pima Community College as two of five permanent members on its board.

"It allows us to showcase (UA and PCC) in a whole different way to show the business world that we are in the Top 10 in the country in a lot we have done," Thoreson said, adding, however, that education is not all success in Tucson. "We have to assess our gaps. We know our K-12 education is not the best."

All of this will be considered as REDC drafts a strategic plan on how the city-county entity should go about building a high-tech-oriented economy.

Bob Davis, an industrial/commercial broker at CB Richard Ellis in Tucson, wonders how this latest attempt will fare.

"(Prior strategic plans have) always gotten more complex," said Davis, who helped IBM sell its Tucson complex to UA, which established its Science and Technology Park there. "It's leadership, too. The leadership in this community is fractured. They are not speaking with a simple, clear message. The plan, the plan, the plan. It's got to be simple, it's got to be clear."

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