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October 19, 2001
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Page: 1B

Clusters to cluster at world conference

Teya Vitu
Citizen Staff Writer
Tucson Citizen

Tucson's Greater Strategic Partnership for Economic Development gets a chance to shine.

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EVENTS CALENDAR

By TEYA VITU

Citizen Business Writer

Every month, usually on the first Wednesday early in the morning, high-profile community leaders gather around a table in an underground **conference** room at the downtown Tucson-Pima County Library.

They represent city, state and county government, education from kindergarten through university, the private sector and anybody else tied to Tucson's economic development.

This is the Greater Strategic Partnership for Economic Development. It's in this bunker setting that economic development priorities are set, joint efforts formulated and information shared so the left hand knows what the right hand's doing.

"It's the envy of the **world**," said Bob Breault, GTSPED's chairman, but better known for his optics work that is aboard the Hubble telescope and many other spacecraft.

GTSPED primarily focuses on strengthening Tucson's industrial **clusters** - the high-tech sectors dealing in optics, aerospace, environmental technology, information technology, biotechnology and plastics/composites.

Breault plans to showcase the next GTSPED meeting at a major, international **cluster** industry **conference** Oct. 28-31 at The Westin La Paloma Resort and Spa. The fourth annual "Clusters and the New Economy" **conference**, which has some 200 participant confirmations from 28 countries, is put on by The Competitiveness Institute, based in Barcelona, Spain.

"This is to show the **world** that we can function cooperatively together," Breault said. "GTSPED by far is the most informative public-private meeting I've seen."

And Breault has sampled his share of economic development teams around the **world**. He helped form 19 of the **world's** 21 optics industry **clusters**, including the Tucson optics **cluster** that led the way in 1992.

"I give Tucson an A-minus for its efforts to develop community **cluster** strategies by working with each other and developing mutual project," said Brian Catts, director of the industry relations program at the University of Arizona.

Tucson's high-technology **clusters** encompass some 1,200 companies, more than 50,000 high-paying jobs and annual revenues approaching \$4 billion, according to the Greater Tucson Economic Council.

"Tucson has been at the forefront of **cluster**-based economic development for more than a decade," said Emiliano Duch, TCI's president.

Cluster is an economic development term that emerged in the 1980s and describes similar industries competing in a cooperative manner with each other and working together with local government and education sectors.

Nearly all the top experts in **cluster** economics worldwide will attend the **conference**, where the goal will be for **cluster** practitioners to share ideas about what works and what doesn't work in building **clusters**.

"It's still more of an art than a science," Catts said.

TCI has never had a **cluster conference** in the United States. The first three were in Barcelona, Spain Varese, Italy and Glasgow, Scotland. But two similar **conferences** that led to the institute's formation were in Sedona and Chihuahua.

"We argued for four hours in Barcelona and couldn't come up with a definition of a **cluster**," Breault said.

The Competitiveness Institute was founded in 1997 following a **World Bank cluster conference** that found a lack of facilitators to establish **clusters**. TCI's mission is to improve living standards and local competitiveness of regions across the **world** by enhancing **cluster**-based development initiatives.

Tucson Mayor Bob Walkup and the mayors of Ottawa, Canada, and Hermosillo and Culiacan, Mexico, will address the **conference**. Speakers with **cluster** expertise are expected from around the **world**,



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including New Zealand, Australia, Brazil, Guatemala, Denmark, France, the United Kingdom, Germany and Argentina.

"This is the Olympics of **clusters**," Breault said.

Robert Gonzales, former chief executive officer at the Greater Tucson Economic Council, has attended all the TCI **cluster** forums and is helping Breault organize the Tucson **conference**. The **cluster** concept evolved here during his run as chief recruiter of high-tech companies from 1993 to 2000.

In that time, he learned that **clusters** need a private-public partnership to flourish, but that the private sector has to lead.

"The role of the private sector is paramount," Gonzales said. "You can't force the **cluster** concept. But there's a really big role for government and academia."

Breault sees the next step in **cluster** evolution as **clusters clustering - clusters** in different communities working together to achieve common goals.

"**Clusters** working together, that give us the power to influence on a national level," Breault said.

Catts still is concerned with improving Tucson's own **cluster** environment. As much as GTSPED cooperation and communication is a strength, he doesn't see those efforts trickling down to individual businesses as well as they could.

"In terms of what I'm looking for, how are we working with individual firms," Catts said. "How do we bring the benefits down to the individual firms."

CLUSTERS

What: An international "**Clusters and the New Economy**" **Conference**

When: Oct. 28-31

Where: The Westin La Paloma, 3800 E. Sunrise Drive

Who's coming: People from at least 28 countries involved in industrial **clusters**

Objective: To share things learned about establishing **clusters**

Cost: \$1,300

Registration:

By e-mail: www.competitiveness.org.

By fax: (480) 893-7775

By mail: make check payable to The Competitiveness Institute and send to TCI/Fourth Annual **Conference**, c/o Katherine Christensen & Associates, 107 S. Southgate Drive, Chandler, Ariz. 85226.

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