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Rogers Considers Starting An Innovation Hub

by John Gore | Dec. 21, 2014

ROGERS -- A proposal under consideration by city leaders may lead to an incubator for ideas for downtown Rogers.

Daniel Hintz, who led the downtown Bentonville revitalization, is now owner of Velocity, a company that helps cities find ways to market and sustain downtowns. He's also a consultant to the Northwest Arkansas Council.

"We want to form an innovation hub in downtown Rogers," Hintz said. He described the hub as "a place where people can get together to discuss the potential of a specific place, in this case, downtown."

A hub is physical place serving as the anchor and center of the innovation wheel, Hintz said.

"It's also a place where everyone working together can determine the DNA of the downtown," he said.

The idea isn't to make downtown Rogers in the image of another town. The image of downtown must embrace new ideas and reflects the true DNA of the city, Hintz said.

"We want to bring business owners, private investors, city officials, Main Street Rogers members and Chamber of Commerce officials together to create a natural resource soup," Hintz said.

"The innovation has to be driven by the people who develop the concepts and facilitate the changes for the hub to be successful," Hintz said.

Hintz pointed to NanoMech, a nano technology company in Springdale, as an example of what a hub can accomplish.

NanoMech was affiliated with the University of Arkansas Genesis Technology Incubator in Fayetteville for several years, said David Whitmire, an official with the incubator.

NanoMech formed in 2002, but didn't move to Springdale until 2009 when the company built a 9,000-square-foot laboratory and office facility in an industrial park. The company recently completed an 8,000-square-foot addition in order to keep pace with orders and develop products, Whitmire said.

One of the products produced by NanoMech is TuffTek NanoSpray, a coating which adds ultrahard particles onto the surfaces of cutting tools used in manufacturing worldwide.

"The Genesis incubator is like an innovation hub in many regards," Hintz said. Scientist and engineers work together to create products with the help of the university, but the incubator was created along the same lines a hub," Hintz said.

Mike Harvey, chief operating officer of Northwest Arkansas Council, said an innovation hub is a tool for cities to use to define and establish a clear vision for downtown.

"The hub must reflect the culture of the downtown, and it has to be driven by people not organizations. The people in the hub need to focus on the assets of the downtown, and how best to use those assets," Harvey said.

When the innovation hub works correctly, it becomes a catalyst for more development and a strong economy, Harvey said.

There are other innovation hubs in Arkansas.

North Little Rock has a hub called Arkansas Innovation, said Warwick Sabin, executive director.

“People in the hub can accomplish several things at once. The hub helps with enterprise development, helps people develop new skills and keeps talented people from leaving the area,” Sabin said.

The Arkansas Innovation Hub has a workshop where people can develop prototypes of new products, it’s also a school and a marketing tool for the area, Sabin said.

“We work with people to help them create new businesses. We also serve as a resource to bring private and public money together. The hub is an incubator space for new ideas,” Sabin said.

The Arkansas Innovation Hub was formed last year. Sabin said he was able to raise \$20,000 quickly to start the hub.

“Everybody was on board with the idea. We knew Arkansas was ripe for innovation hub, so it didn’t take long to raise startup money,” Sabin said. “Don’t get me wrong. We’ve worked hard to build the program, but it’s paying off. We’ve been contacted by Conway, Hot Springs and Fort Smith about starting a hub.”

“A hub is really just common sense. It’s a concept that allows people to work and think together to accomplish greater goals for area, or downtown,” Sabin said.

There are organizations in downtown Rogers that already provide some of the elements of an innovation hub, said Mayor Greg Hines.

“We’ve always had individuals and groups working to improve and bring new ideas to downtown. What we haven’t had is an umbrella that brings all the elements together with a single focus,” Hines said.

The mayor supports the formation of an innovation hub with a caveat.

“It’s like everything else we do. The hub will be judged on its results. There must be a program in place that sets goals and has ways of measuring whether those goals are met. That’s how you determine success,” Hines said.