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Help for businesses takes new approach [The Register-Guard, Eugene, Ore. ::]

(Register-Guard (Eugene, OR) Via Acquire Media NewsEdge) May 06--RAIN, the Regional Accelerator and Innovation Network that aims to help businesses start, grow and create jobs in the southern Willamette Valley, is gaining traction and hopes soon to start tapping the \$3.75 million the Oregon Legislature approved for the project nearly a year ago.



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Its executives and board are in place. It has filed the paperwork to be a nonprofit organization. Sixteen companies are in the hybrid incubator/accelerator in Corvallis, and Eugene hopes to launch its accelerator by June.

"We're up and going," said Eugene Mayor Kitty Piercy. Piercy, along with Corvallis Mayor Julie Manning and research officials at the University of Oregon and Oregon State University have been working on the RAIN proposal for the past two years as part of a Regional Solutions team appointed by Gov. John Kitzhaber.

The idea is to pool the resources of the two universities; the cities of Eugene, Springfield, Corvallis and Albany; and the business communities throughout Lane, Linn and Benton counties to help entrepreneurs turn new technologies into businesses and to accelerate the growth of promising companies to create well-paid jobs in the region.

"We're very optimistic," Piercy said. "Everybody seems to be going in the same direction. I think the most important thing about this from our perspective is not just what's going on in our community or in Corvallis, but what we're trying to build together to help entrepreneurs succeed in our state and in our communities." The project represents a shift in economic development to a more regional, grow-your-own approach, instead of just helping established businesses expand and trying to lure big companies from out of state.

"This is viewed from the state's perspective as one of the big ideas of how to build and strengthen our state economy and our local economy, so we're very committed to it and excited by it and hoping that it can really help in our case, Lane County, provide more jobs with good wages and benefits that can help our economy be in much better shape," Piercy said.

Although intrigued by RAIN, and the shift in economic development approach, some business people feared that RAIN would burrow into the UO and OSU and add nothing to the area's broader, budding entrepreneurial community.

"The idea is that RAIN is an economic development initiative to create and build businesses that are going to provide jobs for people coming out of the university and hopefully be a boon to economic development," said Paul Berger an entrepreneur and executive who has worked with tech companies over the past 20 years. "In reality, it's very easy for money to go into an academic setting for economic development purposes and not produce economic development results." To the surprise of Berger and other local business people, RAIN's organizers have reached into the entrepreneurial community for the leaders of RAIN, including selecting computer game developer and Fertilab Thinkubator co-founder Joe Maruschak as executive director of RAIN's Eugene accelerator.

In a further nod to the private sector, the five private-industry voting members on RAIN's board outnumber the two mayors and the two university research officials.

And although RAIN has gotten off to a slow start in Eugene, a lot of work has been accomplished behind the scenes to take stock of the community's many resources and supports for entrepreneurs, identify what is lacking, and determine how RAIN can provide the biggest addition to what's already here, RAIN organizers said.

"RAIN Eugene has to add value to the activities that are already going on," including NEDCO's Sprout! incubator in Springfield; Lane Community College's Small Business Development Center; city lending programs; the Fertilib business incubator in Eugene; CodeChops' shared work space in downtown Eugene, the UO's Riverfront Innovation Center incubator, and many other resources, said Patrick Jones, UO associate vice president for research and innovation.

He said the question RAIN organizers have been trying to answer is, "How do we create a beacon that helps focus these activities?" One decision they've made is to let entrepreneurs, rather than government or university officials, lead.

In January, Jim Coonan, chairman of a Portland consumer electronics firm and former manager of the Bend Venture Conference, was chosen to lead the overall RAIN effort.

In March 2013, Mark Lieberman, who led the Business Technology Center of Los Angeles County, one of the largest technology incubators in California, was named chief startup officer and co-director of the Advantage Accelerator at Oregon State University in Corvallis.

Maruschak, a vocal proponent for Lane County's startup community, was recently chosen executive director of the RAIN Eugene Accelerator.

Both Lieberman and Maruschak report to Coonan.

RAIN organizers also decided to focus first on setting up an accelerator, an intensive three-month program to help entrepreneurs who already have a promising idea launch their business. They felt the community had sufficient incubators, co-working spaces, entrepreneur support groups and other resources to help people hatch their initial ideas.

Maruschak hopes by next month to open the accelerator in 2,000 square feet on the second floor of the Eugene Area Chamber of Commerce building, formerly occupied by the Lane Metro Partnership.

John Lively, head of Lane Metro, will continue to occupy the corner office, but the rest of the floor soon will be buzzing with entrepreneurial activity. It will be the accelerator's temporary home while the board continues to look for permanent space.

Some who are involved with RAIN, including Piercy and Maruschak, said they'd like to see the accelerator in downtown Eugene.

"It would be great and fitting for space in our downtown," Piercy said. "I think part of that is the idea that this is not just a university thing that stays on campus. This is high engagement of the community, our business community, our government, our educational institutions -- all of us bringing what we have together to bring this forward." While some pieces of RAIN Eugene still must fall into place, many have already aligned, said Dana Siebert, president and COO of Chambers Communications Corp. and a RAIN board member. "This is the first time in the 20 some years I've been here that the pieces seem to be aligning well and the university seems focused on partnering on commercialization of technology," he said.

"You start to get state money, universities that want to collaborate, cities that want to play a role ... and actually just getting some successful entrepreneurs that are in the area that bring ideas and some traction. It's a combination of ideas, money and talent that you need to foster all at the same time, and we've kind of always had one or two of those pieces, but they're not lining up. There seems like an opportunity to get them lined up now." ____ (c)2014 The Register-Guard (Eugene, Ore.) Visit The Register-Guard (Eugene, Ore.) at www.registerguard.com Distributed by MCT Information Services