

Missouri needs to do more for bioscience, business leaders say

By JASON GERTZEN
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A new group of Missouri business leaders has dared to suggest the emperor isn't wearing any clothes.

In this case the "emperor" is the state's support for its widely proclaimed pursuit of bioscience and other technology ventures.

"It's quite evident that there is a lot Missouri can do better," said Robert Marcusse, president and chief executive officer of the **Kansas City Area Development Council**. "It's actually worse than I thought."

A researcher at the **Bloch School of Business and Public Administration at the University of Missouri–Kansas City** recently found that the state was investing pennies compared with the nearly \$3 per resident spent by other states toward stimulating scientific commercialization.

In response, a new coalition — the **Grow Me State Initiative** — is calling for a comprehensive strategy and initial commitments to invest at least \$17 million a year on programs that would nurture promising high-tech startups and important discoveries.

Marcusse served as a member of a steering committee, which also included Jay DeLong, vice president for new ventures and capital formation with the **St. Louis Regional Chamber & Growth Association**, other regional chamber of commerce leaders and venture capitalists.

Grow Me State organizers want to see the creation of a task force with technology employers and business finance experts. The panel would develop a five-year technology-based economic development strategy that focuses on adding to Missouri's existing strengths.

It's a strategy that has helped focus similar efforts in other states, including Wisconsin

Some of the strategies that might come out of the Missouri task force's work could include actively promoting and marketing innovations produced by university researchers or other institutes, creating an angel investment pool and teaming up with other states in the region on an early-stage investment program.

The organizers also want to see state lawmakers take action. Initial projects could include establishing a tax credit program for angel investors and creating a program that would award grants of \$50,000 for companies refining technology products. Establishing a seed capital technology business finance program that would make 20 annual investments of \$250,000 to \$750,000 each is another suggestion.

The UMKC researcher's report makes it clear that Missouri risks seeing other states pull further ahead if it continues to devote so little to these promising opportunities.

Creating programs backed with about \$17 million in state money should be considered a starting point for the conversation, Marcusse said.

"In relationship to the size of the Missouri economy and the Missouri budget, it is a very modest number," Marcusse said.

Gov. Matt Blunt has supported other angel investing tax credit proposals and is likely to do so again, said Jessica Robinson, a Blunt spokeswoman.

The governor has yet to finalize his legislative agenda for next year, but he will consider the Grow Me State recommendations while seeking ways to boost the state's economy with bioscience growth, Robinson said.

To reach Jason Gertzen, call 816-234-4899 or send e-mail to jgertzen@kcstar.com.

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