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Technology belt plans grow

By Ron DaParma
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Economic development groups and others want to expand a Pittsburgh-Cleveland technology belt initiative that is already helping to connect companies and investors in the two regions.

A Pittsburgh-Cleveland Technology Corridor would encompass a "mega region" with 2.7 million residents and represent "134 miles of economic opportunity," say leaders who are pushing the interstate initiative.

Their new idea is use an existing Biosciences Tech Belt initiative as a model to help other segments -- such as manufacturing -- of the economies of the former Rust Belt cities.

"When it comes to economic development in a global economy, what tends to get the attention of investors and venture capital companies are mega regions," said DeWitt Peart, executive vice president of the Allegheny Conference on Community Development on Tuesday.

Peart is involved in creating the initiative that backers say would create the fourth largest industrial/technical region in the nation.

It would include the Cleveland and Pittsburgh, and the Youngstown-Warren region that lies in between.

The initiative began two years ago when John W. Manzetti, CEO of the Pittsburgh Life Sciences Greenhouse, and Baiju R. Shah, his counterpart at BioEnterprise, a similar organization in Cleveland, began discussions.

"Baiju and I met, we talked, and we thought we should start working together, create some excitement, get funding from the federal government and build our regions so we can attract capital and talent," Manzetti said.

As a result, the Biosciences Tech Belt initiative was born.

Together, the two regions have \$1 billion in combined National Institutes of Health and industry health care research; more than \$350 million in health care venture investment; and more than 700 bioscience companies employing more than 25,000 people.

In a recent progress report, they said the joint effort has yielded "numerous cross-introductions of venture capital firms and initiated the exploration of 18 company collaborations." Several venture capital firms from one region opened offices in the other, including Chrysalis Ventures, Draper Triangle Ventures and iNetworks.

In September 2007, U.S. Reps. Jason Altmire, D-McCandless, and Tim Ryan, D-Niles, Ohio, started a push to expand the initiative to other industries, including manufacturing.

Peart said the next step is to hire a consultant to help write a strategic plan. Work on proposals and funding from local foundations is progressing.

"I think this is a brilliant idea," said Virginia Pribanic, CEO of MedRespond LLC,

a South Side-based health care information technology company whose software simulates conversations online. People who type medical questions on a computer can view videos providing answers, she said.

At a recent meeting arranged by the Life Sciences Greenhouse, Pribanic said she learned of three companies in Ohio that could help to enhance her business.

"For entrepreneurs, it can be hard to make connections from region to region," she said. "Thanks to this meeting, I was able to learn of three companies that could be a great match for us."

Ron DaParma can be reached at rdaparma@tribweb.com or 412-320-7907.

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