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S.C. research president finds success one goal at a time

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As Bill Mahoney gets the S.C. Research Innovation Centers up and running between now and early spring, don't look for big buildings with lots of people in them.

That is not his style. What you will see from the new president of the South Carolina Research Authority is something that closely resembles an entrepreneurial company — building business one client at a time.

He already has begun that process. The center's first client is FirstString Research Inc., an early-stage biotech company.

The company is based on a discovery made at the Medical University of South Carolina. It has moved into authority facilities at Trident Research Park in North Charleston.

And the authority — a state-created, nonprofit corporation — has 37 other potential clients. The clients range from graduate students with great ideas and no business experience to research teams connected to major corporations, Mahoney said.

The innovation centers' mission is to use knowledge created at the state's research universities to attract everything from entrepreneurs to Fortune 500 corporations to South Carolina.

Mahoney, 53, is the former president of SCT Utility Systems, a Columbia-based software division of Systems and Computer Technology Inc. SCT had about \$110 million in sales and 600 employees before he left in 2000 to become president of Excelergy Corp., a Boston-area software company.

"I've had the experience myself of actually coming to South Carolina and taking a startup company and making it No. 1 in its market in the world," Mahoney said. "So I know from direct experience that it can happen here."

The S.C. Legislature created the Research Innovation Centers last year. The authority was split into two divisions:

- The S.C. Research Division, which will continue SCRA's core mission: running a research consortium that generates \$75 million a year in annual revenue and manages several research parks around the state
- The S.C. Research Innovation Centers, which will run three innovation centers, one connected to each of the state's research universities: USC, Clemson and MUSC.

When the legislation passed, the innovation centers were thought of as a physical thing — a place.

"And the place had a lot of people hanging around in it, just there waiting so if somebody showed up, boy would we have a lot of services to give to them," Mahoney.

That began to change when Mahoney took over the authority in August.

"That struck me, as an entrepreneur, as a very bureaucratic and sort of fixed overhead type of approach that was not the way to actually build these things," Mahoney said.

Mahoney presented his board of directors with an alternative to bricks and mortar: run the centers as an entrepreneurial startup that meets both the spirit and letter of the legislation.

The board, which includes the presidents of the three research universities, approved the plan Nov. 16.

The authority will hire full-time technology brokers to focus on each of the research universities. The tech brokers — Mahoney expects to have about five initially — will work to match the universities' intellectual property to company needs.

The innovation centers will be joint ventures between SCRA, the various university research foundations and other economic development entities in each locale, Mahoney said.

For example, Harris Pastides, USC vice president for research; Columbia Mayor Bob Coble; and Neil McLean, executive director of EngenuitySC, will form the core of the Midlands innovation center connected to USC, Mahoney said. He also will draw in local and regional economic developers.

What he expects to get is the flexibility to pull together whatever resources are needed to get a company to locate in South Carolina.

You don't always need a building to do that.

"Let's do it and not be limited by a physical building or a physical location. Let's do it based upon the needs of the company and where we need to deploy them," he said.

McLean, whose organization is also working to help create a knowledge-based economy, said the innovation center program is what the region needs.

"We have buildings, and they aren't full either," McLean said. "We need people resources that can get the right companies in there and help them be successful."

Mahoney will hire an executive director to oversee the innovation centers. "There will be somebody running the innovation center program, but I don't want to create a fixed bureaucracy out in each of the innovation centers."