

Time to read from the same map

The governor isn't the only one who needs a ticket to ride

Neil Heinen

It seems like we struggled for so long to adopt a comprehensive economic development strategy for this state that we should be forgiven for resting on our laurels and taking for granted that the new technology fields are entrenched in both the state's fiscal blueprint, as well as in our image and position in the global economy.

For a while it appeared the forward-thinking wise heads atop Van Hise Hall and the policy makers at the Capitol were talking past each other, the importance of long-range economic planning incompatible with biennial political attention spans. But suddenly the thinking of System President Katharine Lyall, former Gov. Tommy Thompson and key players like University Research Park Director Mark Bugher and former UW System Vice President David J. Ward begins to resemble the Packers offense, and the next thing you know we're looking for a fancy title like Research Triangle or Silicon Valley to take our place among the pantheon of limitless-growth regional economies.

The Greater Madison Chamber of Commerce spawns the Wisconsin Innovation Network and the Wisconsin Technology Council, the Wisconsin Biotech Association is created, researcher Richard Florida reinforces everything we've been doing, and it's smooth sailing along the (tip of the hat to Tech Council head Tom Still) IQ Corridor.

Except this: The people working in the local biotech companies are wondering if we're on the same map, to say nothing of the same interstate. It seems like in our haste to affix the label we may have missed a few threads in the shirt. The risk, of course, is a public unraveling. Listen and you hear this: We need infrastructure, coordination and a little more critical mass. We need venture capital, (everyone knows that), and a nice, big, world-class drug company locating in our midst. But we also need more marketing and human resource managers who know something about science. We need a closer relationship between the UW and biotech companies locating in its shadows, some of which UW begat. And we need a more coherent message from the unified sector, of both the challenges the biotech firms face and the contributions they stand ready to make to the communities in which they are located and the state at large.

This is not to diminish the work Tom Still has accomplished already at the Tech Council; people sing his praises. Rather, it's an acknowledgment that the Tech Council itself needs more support from its members, from the business community and from both state and local government.

Likewise, criticism of Governor Doyle is blunted by a realization of budget realities and high expectations of Doyle and his respected Commerce Secretary, Cory Nettles. Yet, Doyle stands in stark contrast to the enthusiastic boosterism of Thompson, whom biotech insiders remember fondly for visits to their companies and invitations to the residence. That criticism isn't meant as mere political

commentary. It's meant as strategic advice. This industry desperately needs the kind of leadership only a governor can provide. This is one case where Doyle should -- politics be darned -- strive to be just like Tommy, boisterously embracing biotechnology to keep it in the front of the public's mind.

That's something the industry fears is being lost right now. Momentum is important. Doyle should be racing around shoring it up, talking about it, visiting it, beating the drums for the state's biotech future. And he should be bracing up anyone within earshot and with an ability to help get this tech economy going.

Industry watchers know several key things about biotech. For example, companies like to locate where there are other biotech companies because that's where the support services can be found. Companies here are looking around wondering, "Where is everybody?" Biotech companies also favor creative communities. We're making important strides in that direction, but a few more biotech firms would probably attract more of the creative class and help retain those already here. These may be growing pains. We needed to establish our strategic identity first, and we've done that.

The economy has not worked in our favor the last couple of years and there's been some transition in leadership. But it is important to avoid getting lackadaisical. Biotech firms need to see their concerns addressed and at the same time need to do a better job explaining those concerns. Government and the university must understand there is more they can do and must do to support the industry. And citizens have to understand that the public investment the state is making in biotechnology is still an important and legitimate long-term economic development strategy that is relevant to their lives.

Grist for the upcoming Wisconsin Economic Summit, at least.

Neil Heinen is the editorial director at WISC-TV3 and Madison Magazine's senior political writer.