

Local leaders have high-tech vision for Savannah

By DeAnn Komanecky

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Local business and government leaders are working to persuade state legislators that Savannah is the right place for a new information technology corridor.

Georgia Sen. P.K. Martin (R-9) is currently chair for a Senate Information Technology Corridors study committee. The committee has had three meetings so far, Martin said, and will wrap up its work by Dec. 1.

Martin said the success in Midtown Atlanta with Tech Square, along with Carrollton and Alpharetta, led to the committee's work.

"We're asking what can we do to help other areas build on that success," Martin said. The resolution creating the committee also didn't limit the group to one area of the state.

Keith Fletcher, the COO of local business technology firm Speros, was one of the speakers at a meeting the committee held in Savannah at the end of September. Fletcher will speak again to the group at a meeting near Atlanta on Monday.

Fletcher is a supporter of the concept and is pushing for the location to be in the Savannah area.

"Savannah is the obvious choice," Fletcher said.

Savannah's strengths

Fletcher said Savannah has industries that could benefit from — and contribute to — a tech corridor's success.

A few of those industries include logistics, maritime, hospitality and gaming, Fletcher said. He also noted the impact from even a few high-tech jobs that could pay \$100,000 each would be great for the area.

The most successful tech corridors are in geographically defined areas, with businesses that are close enough to encourage collaboration and innovation, Fletcher said.

“The tighter the border, the better the synergy,” Fletcher said.

Fletcher gets excited when he talks about the possibilities that an innovative and tech savvy workforce could provide.

“How do you track wood?” Fletcher said. “Or track all kinds of bulk stuff? There are all kinds of things (to create) for logistics.”

State Sen. Martin said tech corridors also need access to good broadband, a qualified workforce, education, transportation and a good quality of life.

“Savannah can put a check by that one,” Martin said about the quality of life.

As for the broadband access, one Savannah leader said the city already has the speed businesses need.

“What people want is gigabit speed,” said Patrick Bentley, emerging industries project manager for the Savannah Economic Development Authority.

Bentley said all local providers, including AT&T, Comcast, Hargray and Seimitsu, offer business gigabit speeds, and some offer even higher data transfers.

“Most people at home, streaming Netflix, don’t need a gigabit,” Bentley said. “But hospitals, game developers, the film industry — those people need large capacity.”

Bentley said Savannah can check a few of the “boxes” regarded as needed for a tech corridor. Other areas, he said need some work.

“Our quality of life is strong, especially when compared to (tech-heavy) places like Seattle, Austin, Boston,” Bentley said. “We also have a lower cost of living and lower business costs.”

Education support

As for education, the area also has lots to offer with Savannah State and Armstrong State universities, Bentley said.

“And SCAD is producing world-class designers,” Bentley said.

The technical side of education for digital is a weak area, but is improving, Bentley said.

Bentley pointed to a six-month coding camp that Georgia Tech is offering.

“Students earn a certificate and can be a full-stacked junior developer,” Bentley said. “By the end of this year there will be 40 new junior developers here.” A full-stacked developer is one who has specialized knowledge in all stages of software development.

If that training pace continues, Savannah could see 200 people trained over the next five years, Bentley said.

“That doesn’t count graduates from Savannah State and Armstrong,” Bentley said.

There are, however, many different levels of experienced developers needed, he said. Mid-level, senior developers and industry specific talent are also needed.

Some tech corridors specialize to some degree.

For Carrollton it’s medical, for the Alpharetta/St. Johns Creek area it’s financial.

Fletcher noted a technology corridor in central Florida focuses on aerospace.

Opportunity to lift income

Bentley stressed the need to reach students early with technology and engineering education.

“Technology is one of the best areas to help with poverty,” Bentley said. “You don’t necessarily have to have a college degree.”

Bentley added that care has to be taken in any approach to creating this, and other, types of industry.

“We push to make the city attractive, but if we don’t include the local workforce, you raise standards and locals can be inadvertently left out. We have to include training for our jobs.”

Bentley said while there are no easy solutions, Savannah has great potential.

“Savannah has all the raw materials, but it’s a long-term fight,” Bentley said.

The committee may not make a location recommendation, but may instead make a state-wide policy recommendation, Martin said.

“It’s an open book as far as I’m concerned,” Martin said.

Areas where the state could help might involve incentives for businesses, help with better marketing and infrastructure, Martin said. The committee will prepare a report of their findings. It should be released in time for the January session of the Senate.