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Giving business a head start

By AARON
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writer

FALL RIVER -- If you build it, will they come?

That is the critical question for the new UMass Dartmouth Advanced Technology &



Manufacturing Center, a state economic development project seeking to lure creative and high-tech companies to the SouthCoast. The center, complete with numerous labs and connected to UMass Dartmouth's engineering department, has a conference center and 60,000 square feet of office space to fill.

Sitting on the former site of the Kerr Mill, the ATMC is the cornerstone of an ambitious project. Next door, a restored but empty mill waits for the spillover business from the currently empty ATMC; long-term plans include the construction of a much larger facility on the other side of the building.

For years, SouthCoast has watched the high-tech boom (and bust and boom and bust again) that has occurred in and around Boston.

Wouldn't it be wonderful, goes the thinking of economic developers, if some of those high-tech firms would relocate to the SouthCoast? Wouldn't it be great if they turned cheap and plentiful mill space into offices and research centers? Wouldn't it be great if they built new buildings on vacant industrial land?

Now SouthCoast has built something it hopes will encourage entrepreneurs and techies to consider relocating here, while also helping existing companies improve their products through research and development. The UMass Dartmouth Advanced Technology and Manufacturing Center seeks to get startup companies off the ground and give smaller companies the tools they need to grow. The hope is, of course, that the companies will choose to grow in SouthCoast.

About 60 percent of the building will be leased to small existing companies, while 40 percent will be considered "incubator" space for high-tech startup companies.

The ATMC has \$2 million worth of equipment inside, including testing and laboratory equipment for about a dozen labs that specialize in electrical engineering, the environment, aquaculture, optics, telecommunications and a machine shop, as well as multi-purpose lab space.

Roy Miller, the new director of the ATMC, is well-suited to lead

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the ATMC into these uncharted waters. His career spans the public and private sectors, from a long stint at NASA's rocket engine division, to director of engineering at American Science & Engineering in Cambridge, to Polaroid Corp., where he was in charge of designing medical imaging software. He worked for a startup biotechnology company in Seattle, and has a PhD in aeronautics from Ohio State University.

"I like to say that I've trained my whole life for this job," he said.

When he worked at Polaroid, Mr. Miller spent several years at the company's facility in the New Bedford Business Park, overseeing its medical imaging manufacturing. It was during that time that he purchased a summer home in Mattapoisett.

Mr. Miller was chosen over candidates with strictly academic backgrounds because of his extensive business experience, which included work with startup biotechnology companies.

The ATMC will nurture technology in the SouthCoast in three ways, he explained. One is to "push" technology out into industry, with the hope that small companies can expand their companies here.

Another is to "pull" technology by asking existing SouthCoast companies what they need to improve and modernize their industrial processes, and then use the ATMC's lab space and staff to find such improvements.

And the last goal is to create an incubator for companies just getting started. Startup companies will sign a unique licensing agreement with the ATMC: the companies will not pay rent initially, but will either pay rent at a later agreed-upon date or UMass Dartmouth will take some equity in the new company. "Hopefully, these companies will grow and create more jobs in this area," Mr. Miller said.



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