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Innovation 'will be the path to revive our economy'

By JASON GERTZEN
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Don't overlook the "recession-fighting power" of entrepreneurs, David Wilhelm urged last week.

Wilhelm, known widely for his political pursuits, relied more heavily on his business-backing experiences in "flyover America" to offer insight and encouragement to Kansas leaders in some admittedly tough economic times.

He spoke at an event organized by the **Pipeline** entrepreneurial fellowship program of the **Kansas Technology Enterprise Corp.**

Pipeline recognized Bruce Ianni, the founder and chief executive officer of Overland Park's **Chemidex**, as "Innovator of the Year." It also named its third class of participants who will refine their businesses over the coming year.

This initiative and other efforts of the enterprise corporation already are yielding economy-boosting dividends, said Wilhelm and many others among the hundreds of government officials, civic leaders, executives and entrepreneurs who attended the Pipeline event.

"Entrepreneurism and innovation will be the path to revive our economy," said **Kansas Senate** President Steve Morris, a Hugoton Republican.

Morris said that as it strives to emerge from the current downturn, Kansas should expand these efforts to help entrepreneurs strengthen business plans, find talented workers and raise capital.

Nurturing innovative companies with the potential for substantial and rapid growth very well could be one of the most effective strategies for rebuilding tattered regional economies, said Wilhelm, the founder and president of **Woodland Venture Management.**

"Those of us who are business builders are about to be brought front and center in a national debate over what constitutes honest capitalism, how to best promote genuine entrepreneurship, how to reconnect hard work, achievement and accountability in this great country of ours," Wilhelm said.

Wilhelm has managed political campaigns for Bill Clinton, Vice President Joe Biden and Chicago Mayor Richard M. Daley. More recently, he advised the new administration of President Barack Obama on matters of innovation, economic development and entrepreneurship.

High-tech hubs on the coasts and elsewhere have claimed a dominant share of these high-growth businesses. But Wilhelm said that does not mean that these companies cannot also succeed in Ohio, Kansas and other places that venture capitalists tend to fly over on their way to doing deals elsewhere.

Wilhelm has seen it work in Appalachia.

Adena Ventures, a venture-capital fund Wilhelm founded to back businesses in central Appalachia, and innovative programs tapping the power of area universities have helped businesses gain traction. Adena, for example, backed a textbook-distribution company that now has sales of \$50 million and is the third-largest employer of Nelsonville, Ohio, he said.

He also has seen it work in Kansas.

In key areas, the 2008 State New Economy Index showed Kansas is making remarkable progress, Wilhelm said.

Companies that have seen their annual sales jump 20 percent or more for four straight years are known as gazelles. The number-crunchers compiling the index found that Kansas had a top-10 ranking for jobs at these fast-growing businesses.

"Here you are, right smack in the middle of flyover America, and you are ranked eighth in the country when it comes to jobs created by gazelles," Wilhelm said.

Gazelle companies have been credited in one study for 80 percent of the jobs created by entrepreneurs.

"Kansas did not become the eighth leading state in terms of gazelle jobs by accident," Wilhelm said. "You are reaping the benefits of initiatives launched a long time ago."

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