

HERMITAGE

Incubator director lays out vision for tech park developers

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By Joe Pinchot, *Herald Staff Writer*

A business incubator should do more than incubate start-up businesses. It also should incubate “a sense of place” that makes people want to come and stay, said Dan Leri, director of Innovation Park at Pennsylvania State University.

The 118-acre research park opened in 1993 has 58 tenants and 1,800 employees, Leri said Tuesday at a gathering of Hermitage city officials, advisory board members and others who are working to program the technology center at LindenPointe, which will house business incubation suites and a testing laboratory.

While Innovation Park has a far different business model than the tech center can ever have, there are lessons that have been learned at Innovation Park that can translate to anywhere, Leri said. Innovation Park benefits from its connection to the Pennsylvania State University community, and gestates business opportunities originated by Penn State faculty members and others associated with the university.

It also houses the Penn Stater, a conference center that includes a hotel, bar and restaurant. Penn State retains ownership of all the land in Innovation Park, and the park’s lease rates are as pricey as you’ll find in that region of the state, Leri said. For developers, the park’s design guidelines also require deep pockets just to build there.

But, Leri said, park officials have worked hard over the last few years to make the park a part of the greater community, and to build a culture within its borders. Park officials support the formation of cultural activities in the park that make it somewhat of a neighborhood away from home, Leri said. The park holds book review and Bible study groups, food drives, pig roasts, golf clinics, park picnics and other lunchtime and after-hours activities that result in people within buildings and from different buildings meeting each other. He calls these meetings “happy collisions.”

“It’s all about building community,” Leri said. “We’re trying to create stickiness through activities.” By “stickiness,” Leri meant that companies will want to stay in the park at the end of their leases because their employees enjoy being there. The landscaping design standards of the park, which include trails, benches and exterior gathering spaces, also generate happy collisions, Leri said.

Each research park is different from any other, and tech center officials need to identify and what is unique about LindenPointe “and use it to your advantage,” Leri said. Leri suggested holding community activities on unused space in LindenPointe because it would get people into the park and help city officials promote the park. “It’s not about real estate,” said Leri, referring to the typical promotion of development sites based on amenities such as available utilities and location. “It’s about getting cool, smart people together doing things,” Leri said. The park also has a business incubator and technology center, and Leri said facility management and client services need to be separate entities.

Entrepreneurs tend to think of landlords as the enemy because they are taking money away, which strains the relationship when the landlord is the one also trying to assist the entrepreneur in developing a business plan or grow the business, Leri said.

Leri added that he doesn’t like firm deadlines for businesses to move out of an incubator. Instead, graduations should be based on a company’s balance sheet, he said.