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Collaboration Breeds Success at Chestnut Innovation Center

By Stewart Lytle, Reporter

AMESBURY — When the Newburyport Clean Tech Center moved from the Newburyport Industrial Park to a vacant mill in Amesbury last summer, the promise was that it would create 75 to 100 new jobs for this city.

That was music to the ears of newly elected Mayor Ken Grey, who had campaigned on the need for the city to create more jobs, recruit more businesses and over time lower the tax burden residential homeowners pay.

A month after opening its doors as the Chestnut Innovation Center in a 54,000-square-foot building that previously housed ARC Technologies, the green-tech business incubator has brought in 10 companies. Those 10 companies employ more than 50 workers. Only two moved with it from Newburyport.

Mark Friery, a principal with the center, said several more companies are on the cusp of signing leases at the center.

Grey said last week that the center is a big part of his plans to increase the number of businesses, particularly manufacturing companies, in the city. "We are very much in sync with what the center is doing," he said. "I have several more vacant mills to fill."

Some of those vacant mills are across Chestnut Street from the center. With the early success of the center, the principals are already thinking about expansion into a second building owned by ARC that would offer another 24,000 square feet of offices and laboratory space.

"I am thinking about how we make this into a campus," Friery said.



Photo by Stewart Lytle

Chestnut Innovation Center principals Mark Friery (left) and Bob O'Brien.

Melissa Cerasuolo, president of the Amesbury Chamber, who has already referred one business to the center, said, "The Chestnut Innovation Center is another excellent example of collaboration and cross-business cooperation in Amesbury."

In announcing the move from Newburyport to Amesbury last summer, Bob O'Brien, a principal with the center, said business incubators must be part of an overall economic development program for the city.

"Amesbury seemed like a perfect fit when we were looking for places to expand," he said. "The city is making a commitment to attracting new businesses and job growth. At the same time, it has embraced green community status and is making environmental awareness a community priority. That combination makes Amesbury the right place for us to locate our new facility."

The center provides both flexible space for manufacturing operations and shared services, including conference rooms, a cafe/presentation room and other administrative functions. More importantly it provides on-going opportunities for the tenant companies to work together, sharing expertise and partnering to lower costs and improve efficiencies.

In the first month, several examples of what Cerasuolo called "collaboration and cross-business cooperation" are occurring. Total Packaging collects cardboard from the other tenant companies and sells recycled packaging materials to them.

Another tenant company, Core Athletics, which manufactures low-impact training and conditioning tools for kids, is assembling the golf club for another tenant, Fling Golf.

Other tenants at the center

include Patriot Vending, REF, The Passionate Change Leader, Wire Techniques, Hedgehog Design, AMRESS and Cenostar.

On Oct. 22, from 5:30 to 7:30 p.m., the center, in collaboration with the Association of CleanTech Incubators of New England, will host a free seminar for companies that are in early stages of developing manufacturing businesses.

Grey, an entrepreneur and engineer himself who founded Northwave Technology, will be a featured speaker, along with James Bleck, president of the Bleck Design Group in Chelmsford; James DiBurro, president of Round Rock Consulting in Bradford, and Dan Rocconi, president & CEO of Bixby International Corp. in Newburyport.

O'Brien believes that Amesbury and other North Shore communities offer technology companies in their early stages an opportunity to operate at lower costs. Space in Amesbury is a fraction of that in Boston and Cambridge buildings. And Amesbury is only an hour away from innovation hubs at MIT and Harvard universities.

The center spent several months renovating the old ARC facilities. Working with Dan Healy, CEO of ARC, the center is now upgrading the old mill to be more energy self-sufficient. It will produce its own power for electricity and heat with solar panels on the building's roof. O'Brien said all the lighting will be retrofitted with low-consumption LED bulbs.

For more information on the Innovation Center, visit <http://chestnutic.com>.

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