OUR VIEWPOINT: ECONOMIC GROWTH

Editorial: New LEDC project is not business as usual

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Recently we noted how the Lakeland Economic Development Council was unleashing an ambitious plan to prevent a community brain drain. The group has committed nearly $2 million to a multiyear effort called YLakeland 2.0 that focuses on internships, mentoring and social networking to facilitate career opportunities for the homegrown millennial generation — that is, those generally between 18 and 35 — in the hope of boosting the community’s economic well-being for the long term.

The LEDC, however, may have one-upped that very positive move with a bigger and bolder initiative to lift fledgling entrepreneurs.

On Tuesday the LEDC, partnering with city officials and representatives of the Give Well Community Foundation, announced a $10 million project to relocate and expand its Catapult business incubator now housed in the basement of the Bank of America building downtown.

The goal, according to LEDC President Steve Scruggs, is to convert an abandoned two-story warehouse on the north end of Lake Mirror and an adjacent vacant building into a campus that will, well, catapult Catapult into a new and more aggressive era of small business development.

The facility, once home to Lakeland Cash Feed, will be revived into an “entrepreneur ecosystem,” Scruggs told us, by building on some of Catapult’s existing features — for example, enlarging the kitchen for food production or adding shared workspace — and by creating new ones, such as studios for video or photo production and project rooms for “makers,” typically garage-bound hands-on types like artists, welders, woodworkers and so on.

“This is a significant investment in downtown Lakeland, of historic proportions,” he said.

That, of course, is beneficial. Besides convincing outsiders to come to Lakeland, the LEDC’s mission is to aid local dreamers with more ideas than resources to gain a toehold in the local economy as new business owners. This project furthers that mission, and we applaud that. We’re confident it will be filled with activity and clients in short order once it opens in 2017.

Yet more is at work here than the eventual 32,000-square-foot, state-of-the-art lakeside site that will be the visible output of this project. What’s just as critical are the invisible details of how it will come to fruition.

For one thing, Terry Simmers, president and CEO of the Give Well foundation, said the $10 million is privately funded by donors whose anonymity does not mask a desire to invest a portion of their own success back into the community.
“They believe in this project. They love this,” Simmers said. “This is something they are giving to the city of Lakeland, and to this community.”

The other aspect that the public may not readily see, those involved in the project say, is that it represents a new era in how the city views business development. In short, Catapult 2.0 is the product of a shift in attitude.

The city, beyond its regulatory functions, is staking a claim in this project by conveying small parcels to the LEDC and the foundation, which under the deal will be the landowner and the LEDC’s landlord. “We see it as a catalyst for all sorts of synergies that will come,” Mayor Howard Wiggs told us. The mayor added that the spirit of “true collaboration” evidenced by this partnership is something he has rarely seen.

Interim City Manager Tony Delgado noted that he hoped a business community accustomed to bureaucratic stonewalling will spot, through Catapult 2.0, a break from the past. “The hope is that people understand Lakeland’s open for business, and we’re going to continue to be open for business, and we want to work with those businesses whether it’s to expand or to develop,” Delgado told us.

Scruggs reinforced that by recalling how many departments and advisory groups were privy to the project’s details as it unfolded. “Business,” he told us, “for my whole 28 years in this community has been: let’s get three people around a table and cut a deal. We didn’t do that on this project ... and the city led on that, and that’s a big change from the way they’ve done business in the past, and I think it’s a great signal to the community.”


A new day indeed.

Considering Catapult 2.0, we commend the LEDC, the city, the Give Well group and its donors for showing some faith in these budding businesses — and, perhaps more importantly, in each other. Let’s hope more opportunities like this will soon follow.

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