

Research Park: Clean jobs and an end to 'brain drain'

By **NICOLE BAUTE**
SPECIAL TO THE REGISTER

In the past two years, the Mobile community has been rocked by repeated announcements of plant closings and job cutbacks. The shuttering of International Paper, Sappi, Acordis, Ocal, Mobile Pulley, Kerr-McGee and others has cost more than 5,500 people their jobs, disrupting lives and families across our region.

As we cope with these losses, the obvious question arises: How do we create the kinds of high-quality, high-wage, clean and, most important, dependable jobs that we want for ourselves, our children and our grandchildren?

Mobile clearly can no longer rely solely on its traditional industrial base for its future economic growth. We must be less vulnerable as a community to the shifting winds of economic change, and more connected to the knowledge-based economy that will drive the 21st century. This vision is the driving factor behind the creation of the USA Research Park.

The University of South Alabama launched the park in April to help Mobile attract and retain jobs that don't move away because land, labor or capital are cheaper somewhere else. Our goal is to give technology-based companies every reason to come here, stay here, expand here, and even to start here.

As the only state research university in the region, USA is dedicated to actively supporting economic development and ensuring that the best jobs are available for the people of the Mobile area.

Gov. Bob Riley has stressed how critical it is to connect the needs of companies to Alabama's university resources if we hope to grow our economy and create new jobs for people throughout our state. The USA



COURTESY OF THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH ALABAMA

The University of South Alabama Research Park is located on University Boulevard, just north of the USA main campus. The first building is scheduled to open this fall.

Research Park will actively work to fulfill this mission for the Mobile area.

The park will focus the synergy between USA and Mobile's emerging technology business community into a single locale for maximum academic benefit and economic impact.

The park's fundamental goal is to use the teaching, research, service and economic development resources of the university to help shape Mobile's future through dynamic partnerships with knowledge-based companies. We are building on our strengths by strategically targeting three major technology areas that already drive USA's research base and Mobile's economy: software and information technology, engineering and environmental sciences, and medicine and biotechnology.

In its first stage of development, the USA Research Park will be home to existing small and mid-sized technology-based businesses. As the park matures, we hope to incubate new start-up companies based on innovative ideas.

For example, the USA Cancer Research Institute, projected to create hundreds of high-tech jobs over the next five years, will likely generate such spin-off biotechnology businesses that can be housed in the USA Research Park.

Phase One of the park is under construction on the north side of the campus on a 35-acre tract that can expand later as needed.

The USA Research Park is not a real estate venture for the university. Rather, it is a vehicle to enrich our mission and support Mobile's economic development.

We are not looking for building tenants but rather for academic partners — knowledge-based companies that commit, in advance, to an interactive and ongoing relationship with members of the USA community. Students will intern in these companies, faculty will collaborate on research, and company employees will share their expertise with the university.

Through these and other similar activities, we will link the private sector directly to higher education to stimulate economic growth for Mobile. The first building in the park will open this fall. Accelerated Technologies, the embedded systems division of Mentor Graphics, will occupy most of the 76,000 square feet and will employ more than 130 people.

We look forward to a close partnership with the commercial real estate community for

future development of the park. Parcels of land will be available under long-term ground leases for private enterprise to build and lease buildings to approved tenants under guidelines that will manage growth, define architectural standards and protect our unique environmental site.

Since 1980, almost 200 research parks have been launched by U.S. universities, integrating the corporate and academic worlds into a single community that supports business growth, research and development, and new job creation. A recent survey of these parks reports that they employ an average of more than 3,300 people and house about 40 partners.

The survey also indicates that 70 percent of the university research parks lease their land for private development and 80 percent of their tenants are private companies. Other recent studies show that more than half the companies in research parks worldwide already existed when they moved in, while almost a third were entirely new companies.

About half the companies in research parks are in the service sector, while a quarter are engaged in basic and applied research.

All this information points to the tremendous potential of the USA Research Park for job creation and retention in Mobile and the upper Gulf Coast.

The cities which are most successful today in growing their economies are those which have leveraged their research institutions to enhance economic development. Silicon Valley in California and the Research Triangle in North Carolina, for instance, have capitalized on knowledge generated by their universities to build economic engines that continue to hum even in a fiscal downturn.

Mobile and USA, working

together through the USA Research Park and other initiatives, are poised to achieve similar success. Companies can take advantage of collaborative research, technology transfer and university resources to enhance their strategic market positions. Through access to skilled labor and educational opportunities, they will increase employee recruitment and retention.

USA will have new incentives to attract and retain students and faculty as well as enhanced opportunities for technology transfer through interactions with Research Park partners.

As the park evolves, Mobile will gain a significant and stable base for economic growth. The city, the county and the region will be better positioned to recruit and grow companies based on knowledge generation rather than natural resource consumption.

These companies will provide high-wage jobs in clean industries and help us stop our oft-lamented "brain drain."

Recently the Register published a thoughtful analysis of the "creative class" as an emerging factor in economic development. While it is true that a vibrant arts community and strong quality-of-life are vital to attract and retain many young professionals, it is also crucial to connect them to the dynamic intellectual opportunities best provided by research universities.

The USA Research Park will support these connections wherever possible so that the best and brightest will have every reason to move to the Mobile area and stay here for good.

Nicole Baute is executive director of technology development at the University of South Alabama. This article was published June 15, 2003, in the Mobile Register.