



NEWS RELEASE

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‘Beaufort Digital Corridor’ launches to attract and nurture high-wage, high-tech companies

Beaufort leaders are launching the Beaufort Digital Corridor, a public-private business partnership to attract, nurture and promote high-wage tech and tech-related companies to Beaufort.

The idea to emphasize small technology companies is the focus of the Charleston Digital Corridor, which in 15 years has seen its tech economy grow from 18 companies in 2001 to 350+ companies in 2015. That same model will be used in Beaufort following a unanimous vote Tuesday night by the Beaufort Redevelopment Commission.

The Beaufort Digital Corridor “is something that makes it possible for the young people who grow up here ... to be able to stay here,” Beaufort Mayor Billy Keyserling said.

The goals of the Beaufort Digital Corridor, he said, are straightforward: Expand the tax base by creating more primary jobs; successfully help exiting military transition to the civilian workforce; court visitors to relocate and create jobs; and develop relationships with all levels of public education.

Stephen Murray, a Beaufort City Councilman, member of the Beaufort Redevelopment Commission and one of the key leaders in the effort to create the Beaufort Digital Corridor, said Charleston’s Digital Corridor is a success story worth imitating.

“We have a lot in common with Charleston including history, beautiful buildings and natural coastal environment, and a high quality of life that is appealing to young tech entrepreneurs,” Murray said. “The secret is to provide the business, social and education infrastructure to get them started and to succeed here.”

Unlike traditional economic development agencies that seek to attract any type of company from outside the region, the Beaufort Digital Corridor will promote Beaufort’s quality of life and

focus on creating the business, social and education environments that are attractive to tech and tech-related companies.

The first step for Beaufort Digital Corridor project will be the renovation and up-fit of office space 500 Carteret Street, just blocks from Bay Street and the Henry C. Chambers Waterfront Park. About 5,000 square feet of the structure's total 18,000 square feet will be converted for use by small new tech companies.

Beaufort City Manager Bill Prokop, who worked closely with Murray and the Redevelopment Commission to create the Beaufort Digital Corridor, said office space at 500 Carteret could be renovated by mid-fall and the first 10-12 participants could be working in the center by late December.

“Our goal is 10-12 by the end of this year, and 100 participants here at BASEcamp within five years,” Prokop said. “There are a lot of strategies to put into play to make that happen, but we are ideally located to tap our talent bank with the Marine Corps Air Station, USCB and the Technical College of the Lowcountry right outside the door.”

The City of Beaufort will establish an operating partnership with the Charleston Digital Corridor to utilize their hands-on experience and expertise to execute a similar business development strategy for the City of Beaufort. In essence, the Charleston group will incubate Beaufort's tech and tech-related business development effort.

The success of the Beaufort Digital Corridor will require meaningful participation from the local community. “We will seek private professional and financial partners to assist us with making the Beaufort Digital Corridor successful.” Keyserling said. “Together we need to make this work.”

In the 1990s, many national surveys consistently ranked Charleston at or near the top of desired places to live. As in Beaufort in recent years, the accolades were primarily tied to history, preservation, hospitality and livability. But a closer look at the Beaufort and Charleston data raised concerns:

- Both economies were heavily dependent on the “lower wage” visitor industry
- The cost of living was rising at a dramatic rate while per-capita wages were stagnant
- A significant percentage of higher education graduates were leaving the area for employment elsewhere due to lack of economic opportunity.

“The issues facing Beaufort are strikingly similar to Charleston's challenges in the 1990s, namely rising cost of living, dependence on military establishments, visitor-centric development, stagnating wage-levels, and brain drain,” said Ernest Andrade, executive director of the Charleston Digital Corridor.

Andrade said the project is a “business development initiative” because it will focus on helping homegrown and local talent create new tech-related businesses, rather than traveling to other states or other countries to recruit existing companies to relocate to the Lowcountry.

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