Holding up our end of the deal

BY TODD ERDLEY

For longtime residents of State College, you likely remember the days of a thriving local economy. You remember the days of large tech companies like C-Cor, Corning, HRB and Murata. You remember when the downtown had more diversity in its shops and restaurants. And you remember a time when there was greater economic balance between town and gown.

Fast forward to today. Over the past decade, State College residents have seen an increased reliance on Penn State, both culturally and economically. You can see this most prevalently in the proliferation of downtown businesses that specifically cater to undergraduate students and in the loss of State College’s largest manufacturing companies. This should serve as a warning to our community that it is time to take action to reverse these trends and begin the revitalization of our local economy.

What can we do about it? First, we can understand the critical partnership that exists between State College and Penn State. Then, we as community members can hold up our end of the deal and become involved in supporting that partnership.

State College is very fortunate to have Penn State in our backyard. The university brings in highly talented faculty and staff, a culturally diverse student body, and a wide range of exciting events to the area. And when the Centre Region lost thousands of jobs as major private industry employers left the county, Penn State’s growth helped to minimize the effects of the downturn by providing new jobs in research and development.
While Penn State has had a very positive influence on State College, too much reliance on one source of economic power is never good for a town. Along with local business people, university leadership has identified a vision to enable economic development that does not rely exclusively on the university. This vision will serve to re-balance our local economy, significantly growing the private sector over the next 15 years and reducing the university’s proportional influence. In other words, Penn State wants to work in partnership with those of us who live in this community.

Several months ago, Neil Sharkey, Penn State vice president for research, described Penn State’s economic partnership strategies in an editorial to the Centre Daily Times. The Invent Penn State initiative is moving forward, funding local companies and working to bring new businesses to our town and the Centre Region. Penn State has put money into New Leaf Initiative to help it thrive. They’ve started the Happy Valley LaunchBox, which is already helping an initial group of local startup companies led by faculty, students and local residents.

The point is, Penn State is trying hard to change the dynamic. They don’t want to be the only show in town. They want downtown to be a diverse set of merchants appealing to all demographics. If we, as community members, can get behind the vision of Eric Barron and the direction of Sharkey and others, we’ve got the opportunity to help this town thrive as a culturally-diverse, retail-rich, innovation-friendly environment. It’s time for State College to step up to Penn State’s offer of partnership.

We’ve got to follow up on the opportunities that exist here — those created by the University and by other local entities. Without us upholding our side of the partnership, Penn State’s initiatives are going to fall flat. But with our support — and this town has great energy for this sort of thing — we can make a town that is truly an awesome place to live.

One of the questions I’m asked most often by locals who want to help is “what can I do?” The answer is that everybody can do something, and it starts by reaching out. If you are an entrepreneur or are interested in supporting entrepreneurship, join the Centre Region Entrepreneur Network. (Simply email list administrator lara.moreines@videon-central.com and ask to join.) If you are interested in starting a local business, contact the Small Business Development
Center and the Chamber of Business and Industry in Centre County. And if you simply want to reach out and get connected, visit invent.psu.edu or ask for Galen or Eric at New Leaf. The teams at Invent Penn State and at New Leaf can help you use your skills and resources to support what you’re passionate about here in State College.

The talent is here. The Penn State leadership is ready to bring the resources of the university forward. How are you going to hold up your end of the deal, to make State College truly great?

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