

Innovation key to our business success

By COLIN READ, Everybody's Business

September 27, 2009 03:24 am

— It is all too easy to notice the wonderful things happening in other communities while we sometimes miss the equally wonderful evolution that occurs in our own home town.

A couple of new additions to our community should make us all proud.

Nova Bus and SolarNovar both symbolize the new. These names are appropriate. Both are leading edge companies producing state-of-the-science products. And both companies typify the new economy.

Their products are the result of extensive research, development and testing, and they use high-technology components of their own design and manufacture, or purchased from leading-edge companies from around the world. They locate here for a number of reasons that bode well for our future.

SolarNovar, located on Quarry Road, is the product of genius in the spirit of the inventor Thomas Alva Edison. Their innovation is a computerized solar panel frame that tracks the sun as it moves through the sky during the day. Greg Brienza, their president and principal engineer, realized that such a tracking frame can dramatically improve solar panel efficiency while at the same time reduce the land needed to mount solar panels. This leading-edge concept is employed by only a handful of companies world-wide.

SolarNovar is truly a family affair. Mr. Brienza's partner in business and in life is his wife, Linda. And the partnership of Roger and Mary Ann Sorrell are assisting in the business development and marketing effort. The company also employs local talent that epitomize the young, well-trained and educated workforce that is the life blood of a community striving to grow and sustain a high quality of life.

On the other end of the scale, but no less innovative, is Nova Bus on Banker Road. Part of the international conglomerate Volvo Group, Nova Bus is North America's leading designer and manufacturer of urban buses. The product of Nova Bus is not the result of individual genius, but is rather the fruit of a large team of engineers, scientists and skilled technicians from every corner of the world.

Their innovative bus design is state-of-the-art. The buses manufactured right here in Plattsburgh are light, if you can call a bus of any sort light, durable and strong, and very energy efficient. Their per-mile operating costs are some of the lowest in the industry, thanks in no small part to their use of hybrid technology. This technology allows them to almost double the fuel efficiency typically obtained by a bus their size.

These companies may have new in their name, but they also represent the new economy. Gone are the days in which we compete globally in the manufacturing of low-cost products. Such is a race to the bottom that we cannot afford to win.

Instead, the new economy must leverage our greatest strength. It is the intelligence, curiosity, innovation and education of our workforce that is our greatest asset. Even today, in the midst of the Great Recession, this

country is the beacon of innovation and entrepreneurial risk taking. And Clinton County is a part of that new and global economy.

Critical to the new economy is a workforce that stays ahead of a fast-moving wave of global innovation. It is incumbent on us to ensure that we attract and retain the recent graduates that can bring to our community the best of our educational system. And it is also essential that we train the intelligent and eager workforce that we find right here in Clinton County.

We have been rising nicely to this latter challenge. When Nova Bus and SpencerARL came to town with specific workforce needs, economic-development specialists in our community partnered with other statewide and educational entities to give their new hires the specific training they needed. In doing so, we took advantage of one amazing characteristic of our community. Our businesses and our organizations that support business excel at working together to enhance our collective economic opportunities.

We must still work on the challenge of making the North Country attractive to recent graduates. This challenge is larger than what can be mustered through the cooperation of local economic-development groups.

The challenge we overcome is not to design a community that suits our needs, but rather to design a community that is a habitat for humanity. It is all too easy to focus on the community we want for ourselves. We know what our needs are, we understand the lens we use to view our community, and we naturally assume that others want the same thing we want.

These are erroneous assumptions, though. For the most part, we are not the young engineers, doctors, lawyers, technicians, nurses or teachers that will sustain our community. We live here because we grew up here or had the good fortune to find a job that brought us to the North Country. Those we want to come are looking for careers, of course. They are also seeking healthy, lively, interesting, historical and sustainable communities that will allow them to meet other young people and to raise a family.

This is the other side of the equation. We can develop facilities for our prospective industries, and we can offer a competitive facilities package that is low-cost, efficient and clearly state of the art. We must also think about the employees these leading-edge companies hope to attract. Employers who discover our costs, wages and facilities as an attractor to our region also find it is nigh impossible to develop all the leading-edge skills these dynamic new industries need solely from the labor talent currently found in the North Country.

Increasingly, employers must also think about both the professional and personal needs of their prospective employees. And so should we.

When we see our community in the same light as some others see us, we will be on the verge of our Renaissance. Just think — in a few months, when people travel to venues at the Winter Olympics in my home town of Vancouver, British Columbia, they will be awed and amazed at the new state-of-the-art high-tech buses there. And they may well be thinking, "Look at these amazing things being made in Plattsburgh, New York!"

For that, we should be most proud. And we should be thanking our lucky North Country stars.

Colin Read runs Economic Insights, a local economics consulting firm, and teaches economics and finance at SUNY Plattsburgh. His fourth book, "The Fear Factor," has just been published by MacMillan Palgrave. He can be reached at economicinsights@gmail.com.

Copyright © 1999-2008 cnhi, inc.