



## **Director's Report – Don Ryan Center for Innovation (DRCI)**

**June 2024**

### **Entrepreneur Program Update**

#### **STARTUP Companies:**

The Don Ryan Center for Innovation continues to be a fertile ground for burgeoning startups, driving innovation and economic growth in Bluffton. This month, we are proud to list our Program Companies cohort:

- **Hardee Greens**
- **ChangePoint**
- **Petitek**
- **ESA**
- **OPFOB**
- **Dance Canapé**
- **Part of the Family**

#### **GROWTH Companies:**

Our support extends beyond STARTUPS to include established companies poised for expansion. These businesses are scaling their operations and contributing significantly to the local economy:

- **Beachside Tire**
- **Bluffton Electric**
- **LaSource**
- **Delta Roofing**
- **Custom Audio Video**
- **Universal Bookkeeping**
- **Noble Hearts Human Resources**

### **Economic Development Update**

#### **Overview:**

June has been another good month for economic development, marked by strategic engagements and robust initiatives. Following the enactment of the Economic Development Ordinance (EDO), our efforts have been centered on a comprehensive marketing strategy and the progressive development of the Buckwalter Place Project and the new website.

#### **Key Efforts in June:**

- **Palmetto Land Associates:** Successfully presented the second reading to Council, advancing this significant community engagement initiative.

#### **Operations and Marketing**

- **AI Advancements at TCL:** Delivered the second presentation on AI, focusing on cutting-edge applications across various sectors.
- **AI for Business Lunch and Learn:** Successfully hosted the initial sessions in Hardeeville, providing local business owners with valuable insights into AI benefits and applications.
- **AI Initiative Collaboration:** Held a strategic conversation with State Representative Jeff Bradley. His role as chairman of the newly formed House Committee on AI, cybercrime, and cybersecurity underscores our mutual commitment to positioning South Carolina as a leader in AI innovation and policy development. He heard about what we were doing and reached out to me. After our conversation, he sent me a quick note stating:  
*“We need smart people to help build out an awareness of AI and cyber security around the state. I’d like to partner with you and hold you out as an example of how we could push our State agenda of educating our citizens about AI.”*
- **AI Speaking Requests:** One of our strategic initiatives is to be recognized as the “thought leader of artificial intelligence in the low country”. In addition to the presentations and demonstrations we have already given, we’ve been asked to speak to to TCL in Colleton County. We have also been asked to speak to the Hilton Head/Bluffton Chamber of Commerce staff in July. Lastly, this week we are speaking to the National Association of Information Officers about the technology. This was set up by public information officer, Debbie Szpanka.
- **Strategic Planning Meeting:** Participated in the quarterly DRCI strategic planning meeting to set ambitious goals and review our progress.
- **Grant Discussions:** Engaged with the Department of Commerce to explore potential grants and funding opportunities, reinforcing our financial foundation for future projects.

## Events and Meetings:

- **Hurricane Town Training:** Attended to enhance disaster preparedness and response capabilities.
- **Ideation Session:** Collaborated with Cathleen Decroucy from the Hardeeville Historical Society/Preservation on innovative community projects.
- **Collaboration with Town Officials:** Maintained regular interactions with Assistant Town Manager Chris Forster and the BCEDC to stay aligned on emerging opportunities.
- **Childcare RFP Reviews:** Evaluated various proposals to identify potential collaborations and opportunities in childcare services.

## Mentor Program

### Mentorship Network:

- **70 Mentors:** Our expansive network of 70 mentors continues to provide invaluable guidance and support to our entrepreneurs, fostering growth and innovation.

## Partnerships

### Key Collaborations:

- **Hardeeville:** Delivered a 2-part AI Educational Series and planned an August Lunch and Learn. Collaborating on social media initiatives for DRCI/HDV.
- **BlacQuity:** Celebrated the graduation of the Spring Cohort, marking another milestone in empowering minority entrepreneurs.
- **Beaufort County Economic Development Corporation:** Ongoing collaboration on multiple impactful projects.
- **Greater Bluffton Chamber:** Participated in numerous ribbon cuttings, showcasing the growth and expansion of local businesses.
- **Hilton Head – Bluffton Chamber:** Attended several groundbreakings and ribbon cuttings, and planned an AI Education Series with the Chamber.
- **Hispanic Business Association of the Lowcountry:** Established a new partnership, highlighted by participation in a meetup for Hispanic business owners, addressing key opportunities and challenges.

This report underscores the Don Ryan Center for Innovation's pivotal role in driving economic development, fostering innovation, and building a resilient entrepreneurial ecosystem in Bluffton. Our initiatives continue to position the Town as a beacon of progress and opportunity.