



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

December 2025

Overview:

December marked the close of a high-impact year at DRCI. With strong momentum across strategic initiatives, the month included multiple diligence meetings, continued expansion of AI exploration, and progress in partnership and economic development efforts. Significant attention was given to evolving our STARTUP and GROWTH programs and preparing for increased visibility and capacity in 2026. The team also finalized key website development tasks and participated in leadership and community-facing events.

Entrepreneur Program Update

STARTUP Companies

Our STARTUP pipeline continues to grow, with new diligence meetings and program milestones achieved.

- **OPFOB**
- **Part of the Family**
- **AMA Private Dining**
- **Lisa Sulka Consulting**
- **Bright Beginnings Academy**
- **Diversity Nursing Academy (Hardeeville)**
- **Amia Marcell**
- **Garage Experts**
- **Belleau Woods Tavern (HEROES)**

Continued work on potential commercial kitchen and office locations for AMA Private Dining (8241 Pinellas Drive) and Part of the Family (10 William Pope Drive)

Held STARTUP diligence meetings with:

- The Pottery Studio by Magpie Ceramics
- Stephanie Banton

GROWTH Companies:

Supporting established businesses in their expansion efforts remains a priority for DRCI.

- **Bluffton Electric**
- **Delta Roofing**
- **Nexus Business Technology**
- **D'Flavor Custom Cakes**

THRIVE Companies

Ongoing long-term work with established Growth companies

- **Universal Bookkeeper**
- **Beachside Tire**
- **Noble Hearts Human Resources**
- **HardeeGreens (Hardeeville)**

Mentor Program

Mentorship Network:

- Held end-of-year strategic meeting with six of DRCI's top mentors to review evolution of STARTUP and GROWTH programs

Economic Development Update

- Continued work with Startup Companies AMA Private Dining and Part of the Family on physical locations for their business expansions
- Participated in economic development conversation with Hampton County officials and stakeholders
- COVE ribbon cutting meeting and walkthrough/punch list review
- Walkthrough of 97 Progressive Street for potential tenant alignment
- Meeting with SC DEW representative Alisa Paykos-Theurer

- SCA check presentation with DRCI

Operations, Events and Meetings:

- Final submission of SC Relentless Challenge Grant
- Recording for Converge Conference campaign
- Delivered keynote address on Leadership Accountability at Beaufort Memorial Hospital Leadership Development Institute (100+ attendees including CEO Russell Baxley)
- AI presentation at Palmetto Dunes
- Continued website development work with contractor team
- Internal strategic updates to support 2026 expansion
- Continued work on AI platform proposals (Gov.ai, Prophecy.gov, MadisonAI)
- Ongoing collaboration with Furman University for AI training programs
- Meeting with Rob Hickernell regarding in-person AI training and implementation strategies

Partnerships

Key Collaborations:

- **Hardeeville:** Quarterly meeting with Hardeeville City Manager Josh Gruber
- **Beaufort County Economic Development Corporation:** Ongoing collaboration on multiple impactful projects including collaboration. Attended board meeting.
- **Greater Bluffton Chamber:** Participated in numerous ribbon cuttings, showcasing the growth and expansion of local businesses and attended. Working on 2026 lunch and learn schedule for the GBCC and represented DRCI at their monthly Member Benefits Meeting
- **Hilton Head – Bluffton Chamber:** Attended several ribbon cuttings and networking events
- **Hispanic Business Association of the Lowcountry:** Ongoing membership, Paul Arvantes is a member of the HBA Lowcountry Partnerships Committee.
- **Beaufort County Airport Board:** David Nelems is a member of this Board
- **Furman University:** Ongoing collaboration through Strategic AI Program; exploring expanded offerings
- **Beaufort County School District:** AI Roundtable
- **USCB:** Met with Lawrence Shao – Department Chair of Business, Hospitality, and Communication Studies – to explore future partnerships