



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

**October 2025**

### **Overview:**

October was a productive and multifaceted month at the Don Ryan Center for Innovation. From grant planning and AI expansion to community engagement and program launches, the DRCI team remained focused on strengthening Bluffton's entrepreneurial landscape. Highlights included continued work on the Relentless Challenge Grant, expansion of the Furman University AI program, the launch of several STARTUP companies, and planning for future advisory structures and initiatives. Visibility in the community remained high through networking events, speaking engagements, and strategic partner meetings.

### **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**
- **Vital Bridge Wellness**
- **Bright Beginnings Academy**
- **Diversity Nursing Academy (Hardeeville)**
- **\*New – Amia Marcell**
- **\*New – Garage Experts**
- **\*New – Belleau Woods Tavern (HEROES)**

Toured 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:

- Chase Golf Travel
- JP Barnych
- Mitchell Trucking (Hardeeville)
- Met with Jeff and Kelsey Weber regarding potential business acquisition

#### **GROWTH Companies:**

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

- **Bluffton Electric**
- **Delta Roofing**
- **Nexus Business Technology**
- **\*New - 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:**

- Engaged mentor teams with new STARTUP clients
- Met with Kerri Murphy, new Board Vice-Chair, to align on mentorship structure
- Ongoing outreach and engagement to strengthen mentor network

#### **Economic Development Update**

- Working with Startup Companies AMA Private Dining and Part of the Family on finding locations for their business expansions
- Two LOIs have been sent out to finalize leases for the two remaining retail locations on the first floor of The COVE

- Master Lease for The COVE has been approved and signed
- In negotiations with our first potential tenant for the new DRCI Landing Pad

### Operations, Events and Meetings:

- Continued work on Relentless Challenge Grant, including meetings with SC Department of Commerce

Hosted:

- The Heron Institute
- GBCC Lunch and Learn

Technology and Innovation

- Distributed and analyzed AI survey for TOB staff
- Reviewed Madison AI competitors
- Initiated planning for DRCI AI Advisory Panel
- Created AI agents for Debbie Szpanka (TOB communications support)

Education and Professional Development

- Continued coursework in Furman University's Strategic AI Program

### Partnerships

**Key Collaborations:**

- **Hardeeville:** Quarterly meeting with Hardeeville City Manager Josh Gruber
- **BlacQuity:** Classes held Wednesday night at The HUB, Spoke to students about DRCI Programs
- **Beaufort County Economic Development Corporation:** Ongoing collaboration on multiple impactful projects including collaboration. Attended board meeting. Sponsored and attended BCEDC Prosperity in Practice conference, Participated in dinner/networking with speakers and partners at Prosperity in Practice
- **Greater Bluffton Chamber:** Participated in numerous ribbon cuttings, showcasing the growth and expansion of local businesses and attended. Continuing to host lunch and learns for the GBCC and

represented DRCI at their monthly Member Benefits Meeting, selected sponsorship opportunity for 2026

- **Hilton Head – Bluffton Chamber:** Attended several ribbon cuttings and networking events.
- **Hispanic Business Association of the Lowcountry:** Ongoing membership, booth at the Connecta Business Expo, held meeting with Alex Navarro, Paul Arvantides joined HBA partnership committee
- **Beaufort County Airport Board:** David Nelems is a member of this Board
- **Beaufort Digital Corridor:** David Nelems is a member of this Board
- **Furman University:** Ongoing collaboration through Strategic AI Program; exploring expanded offerings
- **Military & Business Alliance:** Hosted and attended. Goal is for regional support for veteran and military family integration through entrepreneurship and workforce development, working on setting up Basecamp for their Military Alliance Committee
- **Palmetto Electric** - Completed evaluations Palmetto Electric Bright Ideas Grants