



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

September 2024

Overview:

The Don Ryan Center for Innovation remains a key driver of economic growth in Bluffton by empowering both emerging startups and expanding businesses to thrive. Our programs continue to attract and nurture companies that contribute to the local economy, fostering innovation and job creation in the community.

This month, we are excited to showcase the diverse range of companies in our programs, from early-stage startups developing cutting-edge solutions to established businesses scaling their operations. These companies are making significant contributions to Bluffton's growing economy and reinforcing the region's reputation as a hub for entrepreneurship and business development.

Beyond our core entrepreneur programs, we are actively engaged in a variety of strategic initiatives aimed at enhancing Bluffton's business environment. These economic development efforts are focused on driving commercial growth, attracting new investments, and ensuring long-term economic vitality for our region.

As we look ahead, the Don Ryan Center remains committed to fostering innovation, supporting local businesses, and ensuring Bluffton remains a prime destination for entrepreneurial success and economic development.

Groundbreaking of "Building A"

We are excited that on September 26 at 11 AM the groundbreaking for "Building A" in Buckwalter Place Commerce Park will occur.

This building, owned by the Don Ryan Center will house not only our landing pad called "The HIVE" but also the childcare facility that the Town of Bluffton and the DRCI selected after a through diligence process.

In addition to a lobby walk up coffee shop that will be Class A office space for rent on both floors. The goal is for this building to fund the majority of the DRCI's annual budget once the entire building is leased. DRCI Board members, mentors, staff and innovators express gratitude to Town Council, Town

staff, Palmetto Electric, the SC Power Team, and the Beaufort County Economic Development Corporation for having the vision to make the next major step in the evolution of the DRCI.

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.

- **Hardee Greens**
- **ChangePoint**
- **OPFOB**
- **Dance Canapé**
- **Part of the Family**
- **Dig Your Photos**
- **Mencias Cleaning**

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

Key Efforts in September:

- **Childcare RFP:** We were advised that the Childcare Lease needs to be done by ordinance. To avoid rushing it and to remain transparent we removed the item from the Town Council agenda for September and will add it to October's agenda as an approval of an ordinance authorizing the lease. There are no concerns with this item otherwise.

- **Bluffton Yards** – Follow-up with the approved grant paperwork and status of the project. The developer is working with the Town’s Growth Management Division as the next phase of the process is beginning
- **Encompass** – After a hiatus, the Company is interested in restarting the process related to the Economic Development Ordinance. The developer has been notified that they need to submit to the Town a change to their phase plan. This is in process. We anticipate this grant coming in front of town council in early 2025

Operations and Marketing

- **AI Speaking Requests:** New requests from the Beaufort Digital Corridor and Sea Pines. In September we presented to The Hilton Head Bluffton Chamber of Commerce Staff and the Womens networking group at Hampton Lake. DRCI has given the AI prestation to more than 700 people as of the end of September. We are being recognized in the community as a thought leader in the field of artificial intelligence. This is one of our strategic initiatives
- **Survey:** Working on Clemson survey creation for interviewing DRCI graduates
- **By Law Changes:** In our October board meeting we will propose small changes to the existing bylaws. If passed by the Board, the changes will go to Council for approval at the November Council meeting
- **Chamber Leadership Program:** We are pleased to announce that DRCI’s own Paul Arvantides has been selected to participate in the Hilton Head Island/ Bluffton Chamber of Commerce Leadership Program. This is a well respected and wide-ranging program. We were pleased to have another Town of Bluffton employee and of course a DRCI employee representing our Town and our organization. Congratulations to Paul!

Events and Meetings:

The next DRCI Board meeting will occur on Thursday October 10th at 5:00pm

Mentor Program

Mentorship Network:

- **72 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:** Scheduled Lunch and Learn with SBAC for early fall.
- **BlacQuity:** Fall Cohort started at The HUB.
- **Beaufort County Economic Development Corporation:** Ongoing collaboration on multiple impactful projects including collaboration meeting with Beaufort Digital Corridor and BCEDC.
- **Greater Bluffton Chamber:** Participated in numerous ribbon cuttings, showcasing the growth and expansion of local businesses and attended. Hosted 2 Lunch and Learns for the GBCC this month and are planning more.
- **Hilton Head – Bluffton Chamber:** Attended several groundbreakings and ribbon cuttings, and working an AI Education Series with the Chamber. Paul is in the Leadership Program for 2025 and DRCI is hosting their meetings at The HUB
- **Hispanic Business Association of the Lowcountry:** Registered to be a vendor at the Hispanic Business Associations Expo October 5. Attending their food festival. Working with Mencias Cleaning who we met at an HBA speaking event.
- **SBAC –** Working on Lunch and learn with SBAC to be held on October 2nd. The topic is “Funding for Small Business”. Paul Arvantides is on the SBAC board and attends their meetings and events.
- **Beaufort County Airport Board:** David Nelems is a member of this Board and attends each monthly meeting

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.