



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

**October 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"**

The groundbreaking ceremony on October 17, 2024, marked a significant milestone for Bluffton, SC, with the launch of its first dedicated economic development building. This building is part of a larger vision, spearheaded by the Don Ryan Center for Innovation (DRCI), to bolster entrepreneurship and business growth in the region.

The facility, spanning 14,500 square feet, will serve as a "Landing Pad" for startups, innovators, and small businesses. It will feature co-working spaces, a childcare center, and flexible rental areas to support entrepreneurs as they establish roots in Bluffton. This project has been in the planning stages

for nearly seven years and aligns with Bluffton's strategy of fostering business development and economic diversification.

Key partners in this effort include Palmetto Electric, the South Carolina Power Team, the Beaufort County Economic Development Corporation (BCEDC), and Dolnik Properties. Palmetto Electric and the SC Power Team provided a \$1 million grant, and the BCEDC contributed \$135,000 to support the project's infrastructure needs, including utilities, parking, and business space development.

The ceremony highlighted Bluffton's long-term commitment to leveraging public-private partnerships, with Mayor Larry Toomer and others noting that this project represents a final step in the development of Buckwalter Commerce Park. The park, strategically located between counties and states, is expected to attract businesses due to its prime location near transportation hubs. The Town of Bluffton has invested approximately \$4.1 million in infrastructure to support the development.

In addition to the formal remarks by David Nelems, CEO of the DRCI, and Mayor Larry Toomer, both David Nelems and Berl Davis (CEO of Palmetto Electric) gave television interviews to WSAV and WTOG, where the reporting was very favorable, reflecting the positive reception of the project. The media coverage further underscored the importance of this development to the local community and the region.

The turnout for the event exceeded expectations, with a large number of community members, business leaders, and local officials in attendance. The event ran smoothly, and the enthusiasm surrounding Bluffton's economic future was palpable, making the day a resounding success

## **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**
- **Part of the Family**
- **Dig Your Photos**
- **Mencias Cleaning**
- **AMA Private Dining**

**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 October:**

- Preconference meeting with the Beaufort County Economic Development Corporation (BCEDC) staff and other stakeholders regarding the 2025 converge conference.
- Numerous communications with Encompass Health Care regarding the Project Sable (facility expansion).
- Multiple conversations with TOB growth management to make sure that EHC is in alignment with other development task with the Town has to approve. Economic impact information regarding the grant is in process. We anticipate presenting this grant request to counsel in early 2025

**Operations and Marketing**

- Strategic planning with TOB Staff and Council on Oct 30<sup>th</sup> and 31<sup>st</sup>
- Survey of all existing and prior DRCI graduates is currently in the field. Reporting of data will occur in early 2025.
- Final reporting for the StimulateSC grant was delivered to the SC Dept of Commerce. Council may remember that this grant was awarded to help DRCI educate local businesses and organizations on the topic of AI and it's use in the business world.
- We are happy to report that DRCI presented the topic to 652 people in the last eight months. The next goal is to formalize a standing, more broad series of topics about AI. These sessions will be scheduled to occur regularly at DRCI in 2025. The goal is to monetize the events.

## Events and Meetings:

The next DRCI Board meeting will occur on Thursday December 12<sup>th</sup> at 5:00pm

## Mentor Program

### Mentorship Network:

- **72 Mentors:** Our expansive network of 72 mentors continues to provide invaluable guidance and support to our entrepreneurs, fostering growth and innovation.

## Partnerships

### Key Collaborations:

- **Hardeeville:** Hardee Greens grand opening and ribbon cutting scheduled for November 7<sup>th</sup>. New STARTUP Client Mencias Cleaning
- **BlacQuity:** Fall Cohort 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:** DRCI was a vendor at the Hispanic Business Associations Expo on October 5. We attended their food festival in September. Working with Mencias Cleaning who we met at an HBA speaking event.
- **SBAC –** Had 2 lunch and learns scheduled but needed to postpone due to the storm. Paul Arvantides is a member of this board.
- **Beaufort County Airport Board:** David Nelems is a member of this Board and attends each monthly meeting

## Overview of the StimulateSC Grant Program:

*We submitted the final report on our StimulateSC grant. Here is an overview of the final report:*

The Don Ryan Center for Innovation (DRCI) launched an AI Best Practices and Implementation Educational Program for startups and small businesses in the Lowcountry with the support of the StimulateSC grant. This initiative aimed to equip local businesses with tools and knowledge to leverage AI for operational efficiency, innovation, and competitiveness. The program consisted of educational modules covering AI fundamentals, business applications and hands-on experience.

### **Key Achievements:**

**Broad Participation:** The program successfully reached over 650 participants from diverse sectors, including professional organizations, businesses (large and small), community groups, and educational institutions.

**Positive Reception:** The response from attendees was overwhelmingly positive. The hands-on demonstrations, particularly, were pivotal in engaging participants and making the technology more accessible. This format demystified AI, reduced anxiety, and provided clear guidance on how to implement AI in practical, everyday business operations.

**Positioning as a Regional AI Authority:** The program helped DRCI establish itself as a thought leader in AI across the region, one of our strategic goals. The knowledge gained and shared through the program has placed DRCI in a strong position to continue serving as a resource for AI education in the community.

**Challenges and Adaptations:** Initially, we planned to charge for the sessions and offer in-depth, multi-module courses. However, we found that many participants had only basic knowledge of AI and were hesitant to invest financially without a clear understanding of its value. To address this, we adapted our approach by splitting the program into two phases: an introductory session to explain AI concepts and a hands-on demonstration to show real-time applications. This shift helped bridge the knowledge gap and increased engagement significantly.

**Unexpected Outcomes:** The grant accelerated our program's timeline, allowing us to implement AI education earlier than planned. This early adoption provided several benefits:

**Internal Efficiency Gains:** By using AI tools ourselves, we improved our own operations, automating processes and streamlining workflows. This enhanced our efficiency, allowing us to serve our community more effectively.

**Knowledge Transfer to Clients:** As we refined our AI understanding, we passed this expertise onto the businesses in our incubator. This ripple effect empowered startups to integrate AI into their own processes, improving productivity, creativity, and scalability. Businesses are now better equipped to leverage AI for success.

**Long-Term Strategies:** Looking forward, we believe that the market for AI education will continue to grow. We anticipate offering more advanced, paid AI courses in the coming years as businesses become

increasingly familiar with the technology and its applications. Additionally, we plan to expand our curriculum to include discussions on the ethical considerations and potential risks of AI, ensuring that local businesses adopt AI responsibly.

**Conclusion:** The StimulateSC grant has been instrumental in positioning the DRCI as a leader in AI education, while also improving internal operations and helping local businesses integrate AI. The program not only accelerated our AI initiatives but also created a foundation for future growth, collaboration, and continued success in the region's business ecosystem.