



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

**August 2025**

### **Overview:**

August was a productive month at the Don Ryan Center for Innovation as renovations continued, digital advancements accelerated, and team expansion enhanced our operational capacity. The hiring of our new part-time Innovation Manager, Evan Welsh, supports our strategic goals around entrepreneurship and AI integration. Our team made strong progress in agent development using Microsoft Copilot, engaged new mentors, hosted meaningful community events, and advanced several new and existing program companies. These efforts reinforce DRCI's mission to foster innovation and small business success across the region.

### **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**

#### **GROWTH Companies:**

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

- **Bluffton Electric**
- **Delta Roofing**
- **Nexus Business Technology**

## **THRIVE Companies**

Ongoing long-term work with established Growth companies

- **Universal Bookkeeper**
- **Beachside Tire**
- **Noble Hearts Human Resources**
- **HardeeGreens**

## **Mentor Program**

### **Mentorship Network:**

- Held introductory meetings with new mentors: Don Gazzelle and Everett Carney
- Continued conversations with Rob Hickernell on AI-based advisement strategies
- Ongoing review and edits of the Mentor Handbook
- Completed a mentor outreach initiative to confirm active participation and updated the official mentor list
- Scheduled Mentor working lunch to examine improvement ideas for program meetings

## **Economic Development Update**

- Continued tenant discussions for “Tenant 103” at The COVE
- Met with *Tim Dolnik* and *BCEDC* on COVE lease opportunities and economic strategy
- Engaged with *Spartina 449* to collect additional details for EDIP evaluation
- Participated in economic grant-related work

## **Operations, Events and Meetings:**

- New Hire: Evan Welsh joined DRCI as the PT Innovation Manager
- Hosted GBCC Lunch & Learn at The HUB
- Spoke at GBCC Coffee and Connections and “Know Your Benefits” events
- Finalized and submitted bylaw changes to Town Council for review—including creation of the “Don Ryan Family Seat on the Board
- Reviewed SC Relentless Challenge Grant opportunity
- Met with Peter Keane to explore AI business strategy and regional connections

- Hosted USCB Leadership Retreat at The HUB
- Presented DRCI 101 to new Hardeeville Clerk Esveidi Noriega and Town Hall's Kristy Carge
- Participated in tech coordination meeting for The HIVE
- Whiteboards installed and privacy film added as part of DRCI renovations
- Continued filming for the Client Stories video series
- Discussions with Derek Hopkins about clinic/supplement business
- Hosted meeting with Samantha Dunne (LoCo Soda) to learn more about business plans
- Exploratory call with Furman University to learn more about their AI program
- Created an AI agent for staff report and ordinance packet generation
- Drafting materials for internal motion and summary documentation
- Initial phone call with HEROES Belleau Wood Tavern

## Partnerships

### Key Collaborations:

- **Hardeeville:** Diversity Nursing starting the Hardeeville STARTUP program end of this month. Attended their Ribbon Cutting ceremony. Scheduled regular quarterly updates with Hardeeville City Manager Josh Gruber
- **BlacQuity:** Next Cohort started August 20
- **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. Continuing to host lunch and learns 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, Met with Alex to discuss space at the COVE and potential tenants for the first floor. Registered for the Connecta Business Expo in October
- **Beaufort County Airport Board:** David Nelems is a member of this Board
- **Beaufort Digital Corridor:** David Nelems is a member of this Board