

Sunday
August 6, 2017

THE DAILY SENTINEL

GRAND JUNCTION, COLORADO

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TECH BURST MORE OF A SLOW BURN

Vision of region as a technology hub stalled without big local buy-in, entrepreneurs say

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Grand Junction's road from oil shale to uranium to natural gas was rocky, but predictable in its own way. Each burst of prosperity had a well-worn path blazed by previous booms and their inevitable busts, all traceable to the development of natural resources that could be done better and cheaper elsewhere.



GRETEL DAUGHERTY / The Daily Sentinel
ProStar software developer Robert VanMatre, left, and geospatial intelligence specialist Carey Wheeler wear virtual reality headgear as SynaptixGames' "Day of Destruction" plays on the screen in front of them at ProStar's Horizon Drive office. The game's concept is the movie "Independence Day," but from the point of view of the aliens.

The next leg, though — pushing the silicon-paved superhighway of software through Grand Junction — has no such roadmap. But it does have a small corps of trailblazers who are simultaneously building on-ramps from a Horizon Drive building built originally with Grand Junction's traditional industry base in mind and from downtown Grand Junction.

Making certain that Grand Junction develops a "tech hub," as its backers see their role, isn't as easy as finding a giant multinational corporation — Exxon? — to take the lead. Or as fraught with pain as the last boom, fueled largely by the desire of Americans to control their own energy supplies after the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001.

This time the next boom isn't driven by energy.

It's driven by the need to keep up with technological advancement, or wither.

Two men, Ken Carson and Jim Grant — both from Texas and who happened to retire in the same Redlands neighborhood — are former executives from Texas Instruments and Hewlett-Packard, respectively, and they see the future of Grand Junction written in bits and bytes; BTUs, not so much.



Page Tucker
CEO of ProStar

“Jim and I saw three years ago how the local economy was going to pot,” Carson said, so they began looking for ways to invigorate the Grand Valley’s economy.

After interviewing 30 community leaders, Carson and Grant said they found few who grasp the opportunity that technology offers the Grand Valley.

“Leadership in Grand Junction doesn’t understand the tech revolution,” Carson said.

“There’s not a whole bunch of support for turning Grand Junction into a tech hub,” said Page Tucker, whose ProStar Geocorp is at the center of the effort. “If there is, I’m not feeling it.”



Aaron Young
CEO of KAART

To be sure, many local governments have resisted the idea of incentives for fledgling companies, said Aaron Young, who bought the former Mesa County administration building at 750 Main St. last year and is in the midst of transforming it into a building serving technology companies, as well as Factory, a coworking space for entrepreneurs and others seeking to work in a tech environment alongside others in similar positions. Young’s Kaart Group, LLC, and some 18 employees are headquartered there, mapping the earth in ways that haven’t been done before.

Young bought the building last year, investing \$1 million in the purchase and devoting even more money to revamping it for current needs.

“There’s a lot of money just sitting idle because nobody wants the risk” of investing cash into the tech industry, Young said.

Grand Junction’s interest in outdoor recreation is well and good, Young said, but it poses the question of whether the city would participate in the development of a tech center as it has in the development of an outdoor-recreation business park.

A newcomer to the Grand Valley, Erica Witherspoon, a veteran of Amazon, Microsoft and Nintendo, said Grand Junction certainly faces challenges (see related story, this page), but said the business community is “very supportive” of attracting and growing technology-related businesses to western Colorado.

Grand Junction has two distinct centers of tech activity, one downtown and centered on Factory and Kaart, and the other on Horizon Drive, where Tucker has assembled a team of entrepreneurs and a few employees working on their own projects and on ProStar’s Transparent Earth, a geospatial project that is aimed at helping municipalities, utilities and others know exactly what pipes, wires and other underpinnings of modern society lie beneath the surface of roads, yards, homes and offices.

Putting a tech hub in a largely rural environment isn’t unprecedented, Carson and Grant said, citing active nodes of tech businesses in places as far-flung from metropolitan centers as Fargo, North Dakota, and Montgomery County, Alabama.

In Grand Junction, “We have all the assets,” Grant said. “We just need to have them assembled.”

As for a tech hub, Grand Junction “already has it,” said Stephen Madsen, who, with his father, Robert, own and operate SynapticSwitch, which offers games through SynaptixGames. “It just needs to keep going.”

SynaptixGames’ “Day of Destruction,” which is to debut this month, is loosely based on the plot of the Will Smith film, “Independence Day,” except that it’s from the point of view of the alien invaders.

“It’s a completely different take” on “Independence Day,” Stephen Madsen said.

The Madsens have worked with an artistic team from London and an associate in Texas to put together “Day of Destruction,” all from the Shaw Construction office building at 760 Horizon Drive, where the company is one of several working independently on their own projects and collaborating on others.

One way to do that is for a local government or governments to build a center — a hub of buildings that could be leased by startups and others, with breaks for companies that employ paid interns from Colorado Mesa University, Tucker said.



GRETEL DAUGHERTY / The Daily Sentinel

Software developer Zack LaVergne, foreground, works on three screens as geographers map areas at KAART’s office on the second floor of Factory, 750 Main St.

That approach could help tech entrepreneurs, students, and the university, which would benefit from the ability to offer real-world paid experience to students, Tucker said. Local government would see the benefits of established businesses and growing tax revenues.

“Everybody wins,” Tucker said.

BROADBAND

Establishing a physical tech center could go a long way toward resolving a quandary confronting Grand Valley decision makers: whether and how to extend broadband, Tucker said.

Extending fiber optic cable to such a center could make broadband affordable to the software developers and technicians whose jobs require it, Tucker said.

Broadband eventually could be extended according to market demand, he said.

The entire question could be moot, however, if Colter Lovette has his way.

Lovette, a Palisade native with a family background in the peach business, is working to provide wireless broadband across the Grand Valley from his office in Young’s building.

His “fairly bootstrap, two-year-old company,” 32Wave is aimed at using wireless communications to provide broadband speed without having to extend fiber optic cable to the farthest reaches of the county. Though, “fiber remains the end goal,” Lovette said.

Fiber optic cable, to this point, is owned by a single company, which uses it exclusively.

With his wireless network, Lovette wants to offer greater choice to consumers by allowing service providers to use his network, he said.

“You can buy something from four providers or the same thing from one provider,” Lovette said. “What would you rather do?”

TIPPING POINT

It's just a guess, but Tucker estimated that 25 tech companies would mark a tipping point at which the tech industry could gain a reputation that would attract talent and cash, in the same fashion, if not volume, that Boulder does, Tucker said.

The Grand Junction Economic Partnership lists 18 tech-related companies and organizations in the Grand Valley, including several video technology companies, the Maverick Innovation Center and the Colorado Technology Association.

The process of attracting tech companies would be not unlike the patterns used by venture capitalists, who fund several startups in hopes of finding one that breaks through and pays off big enough to offset all the expenses, and more, Tucker said.

Grant and Carson have a similar approach, except that in their world the tech center itself would be owned by CMU, which they maintain would benefit from a steady stream of lease and other revenues, replacing money lost from the state budget and increasingly outside the tuition reach of many students.

Key to the development of a tech hub is CMU, Carson and Grant said. They'd like to see PhD-level professors teaching courses and post-graduate classes on software development, electrical engineering and mechanical engineering, areas that could draw the kind of talent that would attract more of the same.

CMU, however, is doing quite well already, Young said.

Nearly all of his 18 employees — all but two, who were in Peru at the time — raised their hands from their second-floor work stations overlooking Main Street when asked if they were students or graduates of CMU.

His employees' abilities "are top notch in the industry," ranking with anyone from Palo Alto, California, or other tech hotbeds, Young said, "CMU is doing just fine."

Tech graduates also do well. Better, in fact, than most, Grant and Carson said, citing their research showing that software developers frequently command double, sometimes triple, what many in the outdoor recreation industry earn.

Even better, Young said, the money that comes into the tech industry is from elsewhere, not simply cash being traded among merchants and businesses within the Grand Valley.

"Our entire industry imports money," he said.