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Grant to help retool economy

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The future of the Rochester area's economy might hinge on a recent \$15 million federal infusion.

"This grant is absolutely crucial," Monroe Community College President R. Thomas Flynn said at a Monday news conference. He was flanked by a federal official and local politicians and a jumbo-sized check for \$15 million.

Off to the side of the podium stood another group of at least a dozen officials. Some have never worked together and come from various sectors, such as high-tech, business, investment and higher education.

But since late last year, they've been unified for a single purpose: Create a plan that will snag the nine-county area Monroe, Wayne, Ontario, Livingston, Orleans, Genesee, Wyoming, Yates and Seneca a big pot of federal money. The goal? Turn the economy, which has been reliant on the struggling manufacturing field, into a more knowledge-based one.

This collaboration helped the group win the money, along with 13 other regions. It's also a big reason why U.S. Department of Labor Deputy Secretary Steven J. Law was next to Flynn at the podium on Monday, at the Monroe Community College Applied Technologies Center.

"You brought together every important player who has a bearing on economic development in the region," said Law, who was promoting a new federal program called WIRED, or Workforce Innovation in Regional Economic Development.

Law is traveling to a few of the regions that won WIRED money, focusing on those plans with "energy" and "promise."

"We liked this one a lot," he said of Rochester's plan.

Seeking synergy

The Rochester area learned earlier this month that it got into the WIRED program. Now it has the money and a more collaborative spirit to push for change, said Matthew Hurlbutt, executive director of RochesterWorks, which is the nonprofit arm of the Monroe County/Rochester Workforce Investment Board.

Along with the \$15 million, 21 local partners including governments, the Rochester Angel Network, Infotonics Technology Center, the Rochester Business Alliance and MCC will raise another \$22 million.

"We're very excited," said WIRED member Paul Wetenhall, president of High Tech Rochester, which runs the Lennox Tech incubator. "It's really a validation that we do have a lot of resources in Rochester, and that we know what we're doing.

"What's really exciting is that a lot of the pieces are coming together."

The downsizing of major manufacturers most notably Eastman Kodak Co. and Xerox Corp. has shaken the local landscape. Local officials have made efforts to re-create the economy, focusing on entrepreneurship and emerging sectors such as optics and imaging, biotechnology and life sciences and alternative energies.

Attempts to diversify the economy, however, have had little impact, mostly because of a lack of collaboration. Although the area is

a hotbed of intellectual property, it's mostly tied up within big companies and universities and not getting into the commercial market, according to a copy of the Finger Lakes Partnership's WIRED application, obtained by the Democrat and Chronicle.

"The embers are here, there's just not enough oxygen," said Duncan Moore of The Institute of Optics at the University of Rochester, who is part of the WIRED project.

The money will flow through RochesterWorks, designated the local lead agency on the project. Several initiatives will be rolled out in the coming months.

Some of the proposals, according to the application:

*Bolster existing programs, such as the Rochester Regional Business Plan Contest and the Rochester Museum & Science Center's "Innovation Place." Curriculum would be developed for middle and high school around the latter exhibit, which focuses on local inventors and innovations.

*Sixty teachers would be interns at local employers, "experiencing business innovation and advanced technologies first-hand."

*Create a Web-based "Knowledge Clearinghouse" that would be a centralized repository of regional data on salaries, graduates by field, company lists, university research, among others. Cost is \$1 million.

*Ongoing training for workers, including \$1.9 million in scholarships for accredited certifications for employed people looking to upgrade their skills in areas such as science, technology and entrepreneurship.

*The biggest chunk of the federal money \$2.1 million would help create 12 new, high-tech companies. The goal? Learn how to identify which local inventions will make good commercial products. Train the managers and workers who will start and expand the company.

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What's at stake

Our future economy, specifically jobs. The regional labor force people with jobs and those looking for work keeps shrinking, sparking fears that people are so fed up with the local job market that they're leaving the area. The WIRED effort seeks to create knowledge-based jobs to replace the region's lost manufacturing jobs.

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