

Idaho Statesman, Monday, Aug. 3, 2009 – Opinion by Kevin Richert

ISU's 'Core' move seems like a smart move

Workers were scrambling last week to put down tile and complete classrooms at Idaho State University's Meridian campus - and for good reason. ISU staff is scheduled to move in this week, and classes on the 182,000-square-foot campus will begin in August.

Will a similar flurry of private business activity follow? The answer could go a long way to determining the future of Meridian's economy, and the Treasure Valley's health care job sector.

In shopping mall parlance, ISU is an anchor store. When the university finishes moving into its share of the old Jabil manufacturing site, it will be one of the key occupants of the Core, a 3-mile-long enterprise zone just off of Interstate 84.

In theory, the Core has promise. Supporters hope to attract and nurture health care-related businesses in the 1,800-acre corridor. They believe businesses will want to locate near anchors such as St. Luke's Regional Medical Center, Blue Cross of Idaho and ISU, which is responsible for 75 percent of the health-related degrees offered by Idaho's public four-year universities.

The model Core tenant is a company like PKG Inc., a manufacturing company that was established in 1988 and now has about 65 employees. The company has branched out from building customized keyboards and keypads, and now does about two-thirds of its business supplying user interface equipment for the medical industry. By locating in the Core, and working with nearby health professionals, PKG hopes to be able to better anticipate the needs of the health care industry, said Bill Canon of PKG.

The Core is something of a marriage of convenience. The city of Meridian is continuing to look for ways to create jobs that allow their residents to work close to home. Boasting more than 1,300 new health care-related jobs in the past three years, Meridian sees a potential growth sector.

ISU faces some pressure to rebuild enrollment: its spring headcount of 12,752 is an increase from 2008 but is nearly 1,000 students shy of its 2006 headcount. Consequently, ISU needs to build on its most valuable niche - its state-mandated mission to offer health-related degree programs. As a result, ISU wants to attract more students and research dollars in the state's population center. I can't predict whether it will all work. But it strikes me as a much better business model than ISU's controversial and potentially costly plan for offering medical degrees.

MOVING ON MERCURY

The Idaho Board of Environmental Quality did the right thing Wednesday. But how could the board have done otherwise? On a 5-0 vote, the group of gubernatorial appointees agreed to write tougher mercury regulations. The new rule would require industry to use the best available technology to control mercury, a toxic metal that can damage the brain, heart, kidneys, lungs and immune system - and is of particular risk to unborn babies and young children.

I would have been surprised if this had gone down otherwise. Considering Gov. Butch Otter's strident public campaign against mercury storage at the Idaho National Laboratory, the state would look nothing less than hypocritical if it didn't take steps to address mercury pollution in its lakes.

Rules are subject to legislative approval, but they go into effect (and have the force of law) unless both houses vote to reject them.

Politics aside, credit to Monsanto and the Idaho Conservation League, which came together to push for a new mercury rule. A thumb's down to the Idaho Association of Commerce and Industry, the powerful business lobby which is neutral on the Monsanto-ICL compromise, and to companies such as J.R. Simplot Co. and Amalgamated Sugar Co., which have raised questions about the need for a tougher rule. Not only are they on the wrong side of the tide of public opinion; they're on the wrong side of the issue.

SOUNDALIKE SENATORS

I guess Monday was just the day to say no to Sonia Sotomayor. Idaho Republican Sens. Mike Crapo and Jim Risch issued separate - but strikingly similar - statements opposing President Obama's Supreme Court nominee.

The talking points were nearly identical. Sotomayor is not strong enough on Second Amendment issues, they said, and she believes judges should look to foreign law to interpret the U.S. Constitution.

And the senators issued their statements just two minutes apart; Crapo's showed up first. At least you can't accuse these two of contradicting each other.