

# As Hanford jobs decline, Tri-Cities needs new focus

Winston-Salem, N.C., has deep roots in the tobacco and textile industries. In 1916, R.J. Reynolds Tobacco Co. was importing so much French cigarette paper and Turkish tobacco that the federal government deemed the city a U.S. port of entry — never mind that the city was 200 miles inland. By the 1940s, about 60 percent of the town's population worked either for the tobacco company or in the Hanes textiles factories. However, by the 1990s, the smoke stain writing was on the wall for Winston-Salem's economy — it needed to diversify. With two major industries in a decline, the city needed to reinvent itself. I think the Tri-Cities can take to heart some of Winston-Salem's lessons.

This area's past and current economy depends on the Hanford site. The Tri-Cities' future, however,

needs to rely on something different. Local economic developers and business owners recently got advice from

Bill Dean, director of the Piedmont Research Park in Winston-Salem.

"There's nothing like a crisis to get you going," Dean said. At a recent Tri-Cities Research District speaker's series event, he candidly described how a city once steeped in manufacturing is building a reputation for regenerative medicine. He said the city focused on merging the brain power of its local university with industry to turn scientific ideas

into new business.

Dean advised to "go with brains every time" when recruiting targets for economic development. He said that brains are necessary to build the companies that will eventually become the foundation for new growth. Piedmont largely tapped local talent, resulting in 39 of 42 of its startup companies being home-grown.

The Tri-Cities has a vast pool of scientific and technical experts — brains it can tap to stimulate business development and growth, as well as use to attract outside talent. And in many instances, we're already doing this. For example, Washington State University Tri-Cities hired Dr. Birgitte Ahring, an internationally recognized microbiologist, as the director of the Center for Bioproducts and Bioenergy.

I wonder, however, if we've put brains at the top of our priority list. Or are we focusing more on recruiting businesses to this area? The president and CEO of TRIDEC, Carl Adrian, agrees with Dean's assertion that if given the choice between brains and business, the Tri-Cities should choose brains. Gary Spanner, manager of Pacific Northwest National Laboratory's economic development office, thinks an appropriate balance of the two approaches is necessary.

Another piece of advice from Dean is to pick a focus area when transitioning an economy. Choose a focus that's already an asset—then invest in it and grow it. Adrian rightly pointed out that the diversity within our scientific community actually makes it more difficult to choose just one asset to cultivate. But I think it's

a positive pickle to be in.

The Research District is already on track with choosing a new focus and running with it. This area is moving from a past of environmental cleanup to a future in clean energy. The need for and benefits of clean energy spread far beyond eastern Washington. Clean energy is a national and global issue — and we have homegrown knowledge that can only help us build a new reputation.

Linking our locale to clean energy will more rapidly refocus us on life after Hanford. A community rightly proud of its role in ending a world war can now be part of securing our nation's energy future.

► *Andrea Turner works with Pacific Northwest National Laboratory's Economic Development Office. She can be reached at 375-3893.*



**Andrea Turner**

Economic Diversity