

## ACHIEVING ECONOMIC GROWTH

## Using, investing in strengths is key

In the 1980s, Coca-Cola introduced a "new Coke." But the new cola failed in the market because people preferred what they knew was already good — the original cola formula.

This concept of sticking with your strengths also can be applied to economic development. Ned Hill, vice president for economic development, Cleveland State University, presented this concept at Gov. Chris Gregoire's 2008 Economics & Workforce Development conference last month.

Hill advised developers to grow their region's strengths while also addressing the weaknesses. He expanded on this concept in terms of short- and long-term planning. In the short-term, he said, use a region's strengths. In the long-term, invest in the strengths.

So Tri-Cities, are we doing this? I think so.

One of this area's greatest strengths is its educated work force. And our economic developers long ago recognized the area's knowledge base and have since used it to attract entrepreneurs and high-tech businesses.

We also are investing in our strengths. The current Wash-



**Andrea  
Turner**

Economic  
Diversification

ington State University Tri-Cities campus started as a shared satellite campus made up of several universities. Today, the campus is a four-year institution.

So the meshing of technical job opportunities and college graduates in one place is becoming a real advantage for the Tri-Cities.

Another investment opportunity in our educated work force is in working to fill the pipeline of technical students by creating a science, technology, engineering and mathematics high school. The STEM school is a way for Pacific Northwest National Laboratory and local school districts to build upon the hallmark of the region's educated work force.

If we look beyond the Tri-Cities, we see Washington also has done a fine job of promoting its strengths. One of this state's strengths is its entre-

preneurial spirit and infrastructure.

Young entrepreneurs Bill Gates and Paul Allen started Microsoft, one of the most well-known companies in the world. It has thrived in Seattle, and the pair have since re-invested in entrepreneurial ventures within the state. Corbis Corp., Allen Institute for Brain Science, Teledesic Corp. and Drugstore.com are examples of where Gates and Allen planted entrepreneurial seeds to encourage high-tech growth in Washington.

Washington and its stakeholders invested in the state's entrepreneurial strength by forming organizations such as Washington Technology Center, Spokane Intercollegiate Research and Technology Institute, Washington Technology Industry Association and Technology Alliance. These organizations focus on helping entrepreneurs start and grow their businesses.

The premise of growing a region's strengths is that the sky is the limit if we nurture natural talents or assets. Conversely, focusing on weaknesses and attempting just to turn them into strengths will

limit growth potential.

As Hill said, it's important to be aware of weaknesses. A downfall, however, is to imitate the strengths of other economies.

I'll share a hypothetical example that Hill used in his presentation.

Silicon Valley is the envy of most regional economies. While it's OK to envy it, it is not wise to imitate it. Imitation will not lead to duplication. Instead, imitation leads to expectation, and if a region doesn't have the assets or strengths to be another Silicon Valley, it won't grow as expected.

Even worse, the copycat region may look foolish and experience a decline in its economy.

But it seems that this area, and the state of Washington, is on the right track for economic growth. We use our assets and invest in our strengths. In fact, I'd say we use the oldie but goodie cola formula that we know works.

► *Andrea Turner works with Pacific Northwest National Laboratory's Economic Development Office. She can be reached at 509-375-3893.*