

DESERET Morning News

USTAR hailed as an economic success

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The push for more innovation and technology in Utah has been well worth it and is moving ahead better than planned, according to leaders of the Utah Science Technology and Research Initiative, known as USTAR.

Representatives of the initiative, which was the result of a bill passed during last year's session of the Legislature, presented an annual report to members of the Executive Appropriations Committee during a recent interim meeting.

"In one year, we've already shown a return on investment, and we've got some stories to tell," said Ted McAleer, USTAR executive director. The program has allocated nearly \$20 million in start-up costs, not including capital construction projects, which are a few years out. The state budgeted \$15 million for USTAR when it was created.

McAleer said it was originally projected that the program would begin launching start-up companies into the state's economy after three years, but USTAR has already nurtured at least one and is looking to foster many more in the near future.

Several "high-caliber" researchers have been recruited from schools in other states to serve as faculty at the University of Utah and Utah State University, Utah's research institutions, as well as five outreach locations throughout the state. Thirteen have already accepted appointments, and McAleer said some have brought with them their own start-up companies, increasing the possibilities for economic growth in the state.

A virtual innovation network has been set up to ensure all outreach locations, including Weber State University, Salt Lake Community College, Utah Valley State College, the Uinta Basin campus of USU and Dixie State College, have access to the resources and support necessary to perform innovative research on-site.

"This is a bold and far-reaching initiative that will ensure that Utah remains a leader in the future of the economy," he said.

Mario Capecchi, a researcher at the U., was recently awarded Utah's first Nobel Prize for his work with gene-targeting in mice, which is expected to transform modern medicine. Such a feat is not often realized at a public institution, said Lorris A. Betz, senior vice president at the U.

"It's a remarkable accomplishment for a small state like Utah," he said, adding that the award is a direct representation of what is possible when significant focus is put on "collaboration" and "thinking big."

"The environment we have here (in Utah) is fundamental to the success of USTAR," Betz said.

McAleer encouraged lawmakers to keep the program in their minds when talking to business leaders in the state, saying that referrals can help to grow the program. When it was envisioned, he said the initiative was "expected to bring in federal dollars but also attract industry partners," which has already been happening, according to the report.

Rep. David Clark, R-Santa Clara, said the report and the infant success of USTAR was impressive and was a clear example of putting things into action.

"You're the only ones who can turn education to innovation to commercialization and I commend you for it," he said.

USTAR is still in its first year, and the programming phase for the two research buildings already funded at the U. and USU is nearly complete. The designs of the buildings have yet to be determined. Part of the initial funding for the initiative has also gone toward creating research teams at each location.

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