

Leaders eye growth changes: *Aviation, biotech seen as top jobs*

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WILLIAMSTON — In a region where agriculture was long the dominant industry, biotechnology, aviation, health care and automotive research are on track to become the job-makers of tomorrow, business and community leaders said last week.

More than 300 people from 16 counties in northeastern North Carolina gathered at the Senator Bob Martin Eastern Agricultural Center Friday for the first-ever State of the Region forum, an event sponsored by the Edenton-based North Carolina's Northeast Commission.

They listened as speakers, including state Commerce Secretary Keith Crisco, talked about the region's strengths and challenges, and outlined the strategies that will need to be employed to ensure the region continues to grow, particularly with the economy in recession.

"We have great natural assets in this region," said Crisco, making his first official visit to the northeast since being appointed by Gov. Bev Perdue. "The future will be determined by leadership — by bold leadership."

Discussing those assets, Scott Bradshaw, director of institutional research at Elizabeth City State University, said the northeast is home to numerous institutions of higher education and has a lower population density. Both are signs the region "can be ready for future (growth) opportunities," he said.

As for challenges, the northeast has the largest population of persons over age 65 in the state, and one of the lowest number of health care professionals, Bradshaw said.

"So there is a large demand for health care," he said.

In fact, Bradshaw sees health care as being among the top growth areas for jobs in the region, the others being aviation and biotechnology.

Some of the job areas that are either slowing down or shrinking include real estate, education and retail services, ECSU Chancellor Willie Gilchrist said.

"**Where do we go** from here?" Gilchrist asked. "The occupations growing fastest in this region are also the highest-paid" occupations.

The rise of aviation as a potential job-maker in the northeast is thanks in no small part to the region's long relationship with the U.S. Coast Guard base in Elizabeth City, Vann Rogerson, president/CEO of the Northeast Commission said.

Bill Williams, director of the state Division of Aviation, also sees aviation as a growth industry in the region. He in fact believes aviation is essential to job creation and regrets the state hasn't been able to do more to expand the industry in North Carolina.

"With the way the economy is now, if you're not playing in the aviation game you're not playing at all," Williams said.

He says with the aerospace industry on the verge of expanding, the time is now to attract those jobs to the northeast.

“We have a rich history in aviation,” Williams said. “We don’t want to be the best in the east. We want (aviation) to be what North Carolina is all about.”

Biotechnology — the use of biological systems to modify products for a specific food, pharmaceutical or other use — will also be a growth industry in the northeast. It’s already changing the face of agriculture, says Norris Tolson, president/CEO of the N.C. Biotechnology Center in Raleigh.

“As romantic and as hard-working as working on the farm several years past was, (that life) is gone,” Tolson said. “(Farming) will never be that way again. We need crops that will grow under all types of conditions.”

There are several reasons why using biotechnology to increase crop diversity is important, Tolson said. For one thing, it increases growers’ control over the food supply. Those who control the food supply control who buys agricultural commodities and at what price. If North Carolina growers are in the driver’s seat, they can set prices that help their bottom line, he said.

Biotechnology can also lead to the development of pharmaceutical products that one day could be used to cure some of the world’s hardest-to-tackle diseases.

“**We can have an** agriculture that will help us treat disease from extracts and pharmaceuticals,” Tolson said. “The Chinese have been doing this for 100s of years, so why can’t we?”

Tolson said North Carolina already has the infrastructure — land and scientific know-how — to use biotechnology to produce biofuels from farm products.

“Biofuels is an opportunity for us to do something else in North Carolina like no other,” Tolson said. “It’s here and we have the technology to do the product. We can do this. We just need to do it.”

The financial impact from biotechnology has the potential to be enormous, he said. The Biotechnology Center is currently working in marine technology and nano biotechnology, areas that soon could be a \$20 billion enterprise, he said.

“The average salary of biotechnology in the state is \$69,000, which means we need to get more biotechnology jobs all over North Carolina and not just here,” Tolson said.

The region also is likely to see a job spurt from the North Carolina Center for Automotive Research, which is currently under construction in Northampton County.

The center will include a test track, chassis dynamic laboratory, world-class ride and handling course and an operations department, says Simon Cobb, NCCAR’s chief operating officer.

The test track is being relocated from Detroit, where cold and snowy weather prevents vehicle testing year round.

“Which is why we want to move vehicle testing to Northampton County in the Roanoke Rapids area,” Cobb said.

But a lot of the research conducted at the center will also look at how to make vehicles of the future “smarter.”

“**The research at the** site is not focused on breaking vehicles, but instead to collect data,” Cobb said. “Within 20 years there will be vehicles talking to each other through computer software.”

For example, when a vehicle is entering or exiting a highway its onboard computers one day will “talk” with the computers on nearby vehicles, letting them know where the vehicle is, reducing the potential for accidents, Cobb said.

Commerce Secretary Crisco said that out of necessity, state officials are likely going to have to be more targeted in their future business recruiting efforts.

"Commerce is going to be more strategic," he said. "We're not going to be all things to all people, because you won't be successful that way."

And whatever strategies are undertaken will have to include teamwork, Gilchrist said.

"Whether it's tourism in Dare County or another endeavor in another county, we have to continue to work together as a team to help this region grow," he said.