

Editorial

## **Our View: High-tech economy**

### **Legislation for modern growth needs clear wording**

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When the Inland Northwest's economic growth was dependent on aluminum, mining, timber, farming and railroads, residents understood well what happened in these industries and businesses. Kaiser made several aluminum products, including beverage cans. The timber industry provided the lumber that built homes. The farmers grew food. The miners dug for precious metals. And the railroad transported all these products.

In the last two decades of the 20th century, as these "old economy" industries grew obsolete or went bankrupt or were overtaken by huge conglomerates, Inland Northwest leaders searched for ways to attract "new economy" industries, businesses and professions to the area. High-tech and biomedical are key buzzwords in this new economy.

There are several efforts under way to grow new-economy institutes and businesses. Most are physically located in the University District on the eastern edge of downtown Spokane. Three of these efforts include:

Sirti. Created in 1994, Sirti was originally called the Spokane Intercollegiate Research and Technology Institute. Its mission: "To accelerate the development and growth of technology companies in the Inland Northwest, especially in eastern Washington. Our target clients are innovative technology companies with defensible intellectual property, large market potential, and principals who show a strong desire to grow their business."

Applied Sciences Laboratory. Its mission: "To establish and grow a self-sustaining, Spokane-based applied research organization that emphasizes problem solving and commercial applications in physical sciences and engineering, strongly coupled to world-class fundamental research at Washington State University."

Institute for Systems Medicine. Its mission: "To improve human health through a unique, focused pursuit of biomedical research driven by world-class scientists and locally translated into patient applications."

These new economy initiatives have energetic, can-do people behind them. For instance, the founding partners working to launch the Institute for Systems Medicine include WSU, Gonzaga University, Providence Health Care, Empire Health Services and The Institute for Systems Biology in Seattle as well as its acclaimed founder, Leroy Hood.

And all the institutions have the potential to recruit top-flight scientists, engineers and researchers who have grown weary of the hassles of big-city living. As Barb Chamberlain, WSU's director of public affairs, explains: "We are in the age of the second-tier city."

With affordable housing, manageable traffic and outdoor recreation opportunities, the Spokane area is definitively part of that popular second tier.

But the prime movers behind these new economy endeavors face a big challenge. It's hard to explain what is being produced in these fledgling institutes and businesses. They aren't manufacturing pop cans or two-by-fours. They are doing research that will make technology more efficient and user-friendly, and in many cases will translate into new businesses and jobs. It's hard to explain all that in concrete ways right now.

Those lobbying for these new economy initiatives are asking for state money to help the region thrive in the 21st century. As legislators prepare to return to work in January, these new economy hopes must be translated into concepts that legislators – and everyday taxpayers – can understand.