

Colleges, business eye high-tech link

By Kathy Parrish
staff writer

It can take years for industry to pick up on university research, or for faculty members to see their findings put to use.

That "technology transfer" could be speeded up at the planned Oakland Technology Park linking high tech businesses with Oakland Community College and Oakland University.

"There's a natural tie between the development of new ideas and their application," explained OU President Joseph Champagne, who has pushed the cooperative venture for three years.

"The state is trying to move into high tech. And we have the brain power. We can contribute in a service way to Michigan's economic development."

LOCATED IN Auburn Hills, the 1,800-acre Oakland Technology Park is bounded by I-75 to the west, University Drive to the north, OU to the east and M-59 to the south.

Until now it was just a rolling, wooded area bisected by Galloway Creek and crossed by the Clinton River at the south end. A dirt road which at one point becomes a single lane, Squirrel links the university with the community college.

But this spring Comerica's new computer operations center employing 600 opens on the site. The area's first building has led to a flurry of speculation over which firms will be next.

Among those named are General Dynamics, GMP Robotics Corp. and even J.L. Hudson Co.

Expected soon are announcements from Southfield developers Schostak Brothers & Co., as well as reports from companies hired by the Auburn Hills land owners to do feasibility studies, land design and finance consulting for the project.

OU contributed \$10,000 in "private money within the university" for the studies. OCC was not asked to pitch in.

"AS FAR AS I'm concerned we're moving along nicely," said Oakland County Executive Daniel T. Murphy, who thinks the project "bodes well for the county."

"We're really on the move. Once the park gets going, it will fill up fast."

To Murphy, it's essential that the county help the area attract businesses. He sees it as a prime location which could become an important business corridor like I-696 in Farmington Hills and Southfield.

"Economic development is our biggest project," explained the county executive, whose staff will help market the project.

"We expected that business would know where to come and get information. And we've found out that isn't the case. So we're helping however we can."

Murphy is opposed to tax breaks for businesses settling in Oakland Technology Park, believing that ought to be a last resort "not the first thing they talk about."

BUT ONE of the area's big attractions is the approval by Auburn Hills of more than dozen property tax abatements to industrial facilities. Comerica will pay half the going millage rate for 12 years.

Auburn Hills assessor Laurence Murray stressed the tax break was granted to entice Comerica, not to get the Oakland Technology Park underway. And each future facility will be considered on its own merits.

"We find that businesses put that tax money back into bigger buildings, which means twice as many jobs," explained Murray. "The public purpose of all this is creation of new jobs and employment opportunities in Michigan."

OU'S CHAMPAGNE presented the Oakland Technology Park concept to the Michigan High Technology Task Force in 1981.

As vice president for academic affairs at

the University of Houston, the industrial psychologist had coordinated development of the Houston Area Research Center. One of 50 major high tech parks in the nation, it is among 35 with direct university connections.

"Industry on its own cannot generate the technology it needs to be competitive," said Champagne, who calls the university-business venture a "natural marriage serving the interests of both."

Not interested in selling OU land, the university president would like to see the university provide property for joint use like a conference center.

CHAMPAGNE envisions a New England commons area "where the university and park come together in meaningful ways."

He is excited about the prospect, which he believes would benefit students through jobs, internships and coop arrangements. "There would be an incredible number of hands-on experiences that haven't existed for them before," he said.

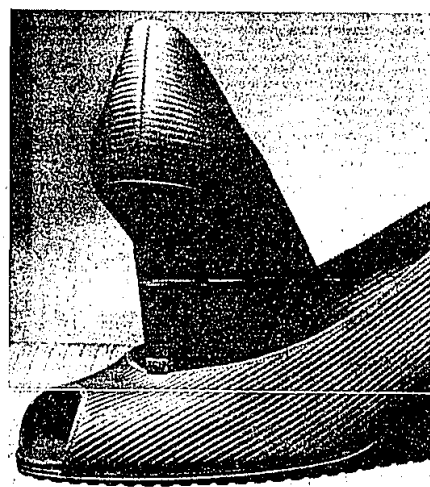
But the university president also acknowledges that the schools must be "vigilant" in watching out for their integrity and independence.

"The thing to remember is that we must maintain the objectivity of the university; to

remain a free institution," Champagne stressed.

"But I believe there is a way to maintain the university's integrity and independence. I wouldn't push the university into anything that would compromise its values."

ALSO EXCITED about the Oakland Technology Park concept is OCC President Robert Roelofs. The development is next to the community college's Auburn Hills campus, which is where its vocational programs are concentrated. Along with manual and high tech skills, there is a building devoted to robotics.



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