

# Innovation Place initiative garners support

Published August 31, 2016 9:20PM | Updated August 31, 2016 11:23PM

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New London — Representatives of Connecticut College, Mitchell College, Electric Boat, Pfizer Inc., the Eastern Connecticut Symphony Orchestra, Eugene O'Neill Theatre Center and the town and cities of Groton and New London.

Those were just some of the 40 or so supporters who showed up Wednesday for the first public airing of an initiative intended to attract high-growth companies to the region.

Meeting at the Harris Building Conference Center on State Street as a part of the New London Roundtable series hosted by the Southeastern Connecticut Cultural Coalition (<http://culturesect.org/>), key local governmental, educational, business and cultural groups watched a PowerPoint presentation about the so-called Thames River Innovation Places (<http://www.theday.com/business/20160830/new-london-groton-groups-collaborating-in-bid-for-innovation-places-designation>) initiative.

It's a local initiative to brainstorm ideas for developing a hipper area where growing businesses will want to congregate.

The initiative, which supporters hope will be funded by some of the \$6 million in state money made available over each of the next five years as part of Connecticut's new Innovation Places (<http://ctnext.com/innovation-places/>) program, is co-led by city-based Spark Makerspace (<http://www.spark.coop/>), a cooperative in which members share equipment, space and training, and Groton's CURE Innovation Commons (<http://curecommons.org/>), a business incubator.

They are seeking about \$70,000 in local funding as the region competes with 13 other places in Connecticut to get 10 statewide planning grants.

"What we want to do is put hotspots on the map in Connecticut that people will decide to live in ... or build their business in," said Susan Froshauer, chief executive of Connecticut United for Research Excellence, a bioscience network that runs the CURE Commons incubator space at a former Pfizer laboratory building.

Local leaders are hoping to leverage \$50,000 in state seed money to develop a master plan for the region that could make it eligible for a minimum of \$250,000 in implementation grants that are part of the statewide Innovation Places initiative run by CTNext (<http://ctnext.com/>), Connecticut's innovation engine.

Only about five or six regions are expected to be named initially as Innovation Places, with perhaps 10 receiving at least some money over the next five years.

The meeting was short on specific plans for developing a cool place where people will want to live, work and play, but that is just the point, said Hannah Gant, a leader in the Makerspace collaborative.

If southeastern Connecticut wins the statewide planning grant, she and Froshauer said they plan to hire the Santa Fe-based Regenesi Group (<http://www.regenesisgroup.com/>) to hold a series of meetings at which people from the region will be led to discover what is unique to the region — and to brainstorm how to attract new businesses that want to capitalize on these assets.

"This setting has it going on," said Gant, who moved to New London about three years ago.

As part of the process, Gant said, Regenesi Group would interview people who have been identified as deeply knowledgeable about the region.

The mouth of the Thames River has been identified as the Innovation Place for the region, a focus of commerce, leisure activity and tourism — key drivers of the local economy.

But George Mathanool, a member of the Groton Town Economic Development Commission and managing partner of a new benefit corporation attracting foreign investments to the state, questioned the Regenesi choice, wondering why a state-based consultant was not being hired for the job.

Kip Bergstrom, who helped develop the Innovation Places program for CTNext, said he was excited about the choice of Regenesi.

He added that there are not enough strategy consultants in this field in Connecticut to be able to do all the work required by various regions applying for Innovation Places grants.

"They will bring a different language of economic development to the discussion," Froshauer said of Regenesi.

"It's one of the best outfits in the world," Gant added.

The Thames River Innovation Places Steering Committee currently has less than two weeks to finish the initial application to get a planning grant.

Leaders from both Groton and New London are helping write the application, Gant said, with Juliet Hodge, an official with the local economic-development agency Southeastern Connecticut Enterprise Region, helping put it all together.

The committee (<mailto:thamesriver@spark.coop>) is looking for donations, running a crowdfunding campaign (<https://www.generosity.com/community-fundraising/thames-river-innovation-places-grant-opportunity>) and trying to identify entrepreneurs who want to be part of the effort.

The town and cities of Groton and New London are expected to kick in \$5,000 each, and Atlantic Broadband announced Wednesday a \$2,000 donation.

"What's really happening is we're starting to work together," Gant said.

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