

Incubating at Stennis Space Center

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As a native Mississippian, I am embarrassed to admit that I had never visited one of Mississippi's greatest assets, the Stennis Space Center until a few weeks ago. In 1961, NASA selected this site in Hancock County to be the static test facility for launch vehicles (rockets) for use in the Apollo lunar program. At the time, it was the largest construction project in Mississippi and the second largest in the country. NASA tested the boosters used to launch vehicles into space there including the Apollo 11 mission which brought the first men to the moon. In the 1970's, NASA added the Space Shuttle engine testing to Stennis. Today, this 1,400-acre federal "city" is one of the largest in the United States and is home to NASA and over 30 other state and federal agencies including the Naval Oceanographic Office, Naval Research Lab, the University of Southern Mississippi, and the Mississippi Enterprise for Technology (MsET).

MsET is a non-profit formed in 1994 as a business incubator and technology transfer office. It is a joint effort of NASA, the Mississippi Development Authority, and the state's universities and was formed for the purpose of creating high wage, high skill technology jobs. MsET is headquartered in the Mississippi Technology Transfer Center on the Stennis campus, and over 30 companies have been incubated at MsET over the years. In 2009, companies that are tenants of MsET reported over \$70 million in annual revenue for the prior year and \$25 million paid in salaries. Sixteen of MsET's business incubator graduates currently employ over 200 people in Mississippi.

Charlie Beasley, 36, is the current President and CEO of MsET. He took over in September of 2008 when long time MsET President and CEO Greg Hinkebein retired. Interestingly, Hinkebein is back as a tenant of the incubator with his company Mississippi Global Technologies. Beasley is a native of Gulfport and graduated from the University of Southern Alabama. He also received his masters in economic development from the University of Southern Mississippi. In 1999, he joined MsET as head of the business incubator. Beasley is no stranger to economic development. His father was a long time economic developer with Mississippi Power.

While much has been achieved at MsET, Beasley believes that there is still tremendous opportunity ahead. In order to help MsET seize the opportunities before it, Beasley helped obtain in 2009 a \$750,000 grant from the Department of Commerce to fund a strategic planning and implementation project for the organization. While this plan will not be finalized until the spring, MsET is already actively implementing some of the changes. They are adding more events to their schedule and trying to improve communications between tenants at Stennis as well as the business community. Beasley noted, "Stennis Space Center has the potential to be an economic engine not only for Mississippi but for the whole Southeast."

For years, there has been a clustering of geospatial information systems (GIS) companies around Stennis. The state and federal government has encouraged this development with success. This GIS cluster puts Mississippi on par with areas like Silicon Valley and Colorado's "GIS Alley" for such technology. In addition, there is also the opportunity for clustering around marine science. Stennis has one of the largest concentrations of oceanographers in the country fueled in part by USM's

marine sciences program. USM's Department of Marine Science is located at Stennis and offers Masters and Ph.D. programs in marine science.

Beasley's passion and enthusiasm for the future of MsET and Stennis are contagious. I look forward to hearing about the new strategic direction of MsET as it is unveiled in the coming months. I believe strongly that creating a culture of entrepreneurship is one of the keys to Mississippi's future. As I look at the companies that are emerging around Stennis, I am encouraged. Because of Stennis' remote location along the Pearl River in the southwestern part of the state, it can suffer from being "out of sight, out of mind" for many Mississippians. However, this resource is one that we as Mississippians should be proud of and looked to in the future to help lift up Mississippi economically and serve as model for other technology clusters around the state.

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