



By **Carl Golden**, **October 2, 2012** in **Opinion**

In any discussion concerning state efforts to create, maintain, and enhance economic competitiveness, talk turns inevitably to the need for a higher education system capable of consistently producing a skilled workforce to attract the attention of corporate decision-makers considering locating a new business or expanding existing operations here.

The issue is especially acute in New Jersey, which has seen its manufacturing base shrink steadily as firms left for a more favorable tax and regulatory climate. The jobs they provided, long a staple of the state's economic vitality, disappeared and were never replaced.

Bruce Springsteen, in his hard-times dirge, "My Hometown" sings of a plant foreman telling his men, "Boys, these jobs are goin' south and they ain't comin' back."

While many of the jobs did, indeed, "go south," many went overseas, as outsourcing became commonplace to take advantage of vastly lower labor costs. No matter where they went, though, the result was the same --unemployment, disrupted lives, and communities hurt by the loss of tax ratables.

While adjusting to the new economic reality requires action on a broad front, an essential component must

entrepreneurial venture capital.

Taxpayer-funded investments have always met with skepticism, primarily because they do not produce the instant gratification many people expect from major government-spending programs.

Supporters emphasize that bond issue was enacted with but two dissenting votes and enjoys support from both business and organized labor.

The Legislature limited spending to academic and research facilities, excluding its use for personnel or athletic buildings, and required those who receive the funds to provide a 25 percent match, effectively increasing the total to \$1 billion.

Backers say the program will benefit 49 higher education institutions, including \$150 million for community colleges, \$300 million for large public research universities, \$250 million for state colleges, and \$50 million for private institutions, excepting Princeton University.

There are related benefits as well, they argue, not the least of which is the creation of nearly 10,000 jobs with a payroll of more than a half billion dollars.

Still, though, the mountain to scale to achieve taxpayer approval remains steep. The public mood runs more toward reducing government spending rather than increasing it, especially in light of the recent stream of dismal economic news.

It is against this background that taxpayers are being asked to support a significant expenditure to ensure that the state's higher education system can position itself and the students it serves ahead of the curve in a world of mind-boggling rapid technological advancement.

When the last large-scale investment in higher education was made 25 years ago, the idea of walking around with a computer in one's shirt pocket was patently absurd. And no one at that time could foresee hundreds of millions of everyday Americans owning devices preceded by a lower case i, followed by pod, pad, or phone.

Supporters of the bond issue are hoping voters will keep that in mind on November 6.

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