



Small-town values for high-tech times

Tom Rosati

I live and do business in the small town of Honeoye Falls. In fact, my place of business is a few hundred yards from a General Motors research facility currently developing fuel cell technology, which has the potential to replace the gasoline engine. Nearly 300 scientists and technicians work there.

My business is a General Motors car dealership, and I believe that this research facility is one of the best things that ever happened to Honeoye Falls and the Rochester area. At the risk of sounding like George Bailey, the Jimmy Stewart character in *"It's a Wonderful Life"*, let me offer some small-town observations for growing this promising technology.

As a resident of Honeoye Falls, I see GM's fuel cell research facility as a source of stability. A number of its employees are my neighbors, solid citizens who take pride in the overall well-being of their community. If they go away, we lose human capital of the very best kind: people we know and trust.

As a businessman, it's a wonderful sight each noon to see people from the GM plant walking into town for lunch and to frequent the various shops and stores located here. Many merchants have gone out of their way to welcome GM people. Indeed, this ripple effect of local spending also extends to the many regional vendors that supply GM with technical services, precision components, and basic scientific research. Our friends in Henrietta would say the same thing about the Delphi Center located there.

As a car dealer, I see this research as the way of the future, not as a threat. In fact, GM engineers occasionally come over to talk with my technicians about engines, and I'm pleased to foster this relationship. Fuel cell engines will gradually make an appearance in the marketplace and will exist side by side with traditional gasoline engines.

In front of our eyes are the small-town values that George Bailey was all about: working with and leading others toward a common goal with trust and enthusiasm; people believing in themselves; placing the community good ahead of self-interest; valuing and respecting homegrown abilities.

Many stakeholders want Rochester to be a major hub for fuel cell research and manufacturing. Senator Hilary Rodham Clinton was here to celebrate a milestone of GM research. Gov. George Pataki has shown some budget support.

However, when comparing Rochester to other parts of the country, some local experts in research and manufacturing feel Rochester, indeed New York State, is not doing enough to catch up with other states in terms of federal, state, and corporate support and contracts.

Historically, new technology has needed a champion (George Eastman, Joseph C. Wilson, and Chester Carlson come to mind) to succeed. In the 21st century, success is based on a champion AND on partnership and collaboration.

If we can collaborate to position Rochester as “one-stop shopping” for the science, manufacture, and testing of fuel-cell technology – similar to our partnership efforts in optics/imaging and biotechnology -- we’d be better situated to attract more financial support.

While we need help from our elected officials, we can’t look to them for this kind of singular leadership: their portfolios are spread thin over a variety of other concerns. We need a dedicated fuel-cell diplomat whose only charge is to bring R&D dollars to this area.

An executive/scientist from the private sector displaying credentials in research and development, and working only for Rochester’s fuel-cell stakeholders is in the best position to make a difference. This diplomat/lobbyist/marketer would personify our technical capabilities and achievement and our commitment to fuel cell’s future.

More than appearing on the radar screens of decision-makers in Washington, Albany, Detroit, and elsewhere, Rochester’s fuel cell diplomat needs to be on a permanent button on their speed dials. I’m sure we can find the right person right here in our home town.

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