

# A Passionate State With Heavy Lifting to Do | *By Deepal Eliatamby*

A few weeks ago, I enjoyed the privilege of attending a 3rd anniversary celebration for New Carolina – South Carolina’s Council on Competitiveness. The gathering of our state’s most prominent business leaders was more than just a celebration of one of the state’s most important initiatives. It was a confluence of some of the most passionate men and women from every corner of our great state who want to make South Carolina even better.

These are folks who have contributed their time and money, who believe in a better South Carolina and are doing something about it. It reminded me of the thousands of other South Carolinians who are passionate about their communities, their counties, and our state.

Those who have worked with me know that I drive about 40,000 miles a year just in our state. During these travels, I get to see the great things we have and some of the challenges we have to work on. As a civil engineer, I am always involved with the development of infrastructure. The first type of infrastructure - and the part I am most involved with - is physical infrastructure. It is the lifeline for economic development and includes good roads that provide access, as well as safe water and wastewater systems that protect human health and preserve the environment. Infrastructure also includes rail, telecommunications, and other utilities that are vital in today’s economy. Planners refer to this type of infrastructure as “grey infrastructure.”

We also know that part of attracting new companies and keeping the companies we have and their employees is “quality of life.” In South Carolina, we are blessed to have mountains, lakes, and beaches including parks and open space that I call “green infrastructure.” This green infrastructure is one of the reasons we continue to grow as a tourism destination, and it plays a large role in the quality of life we are able to enjoy.

Having worked in engineering and economic development for the past 17 years, I have come to learn the importance of the third and, in my opinion, the most important infrastructure - “human infrastructure.” Very simply, it is a skilled and knowledgeable work force.

While the “grey infrastructure” is important and expensive to develop, and good fortune plays a role in producing the natural assets that represent “green infrastructure,” the lack of a skilled work force will cost a company and a community on a recurring basis.

In today’s economy, unskilled work is being performed offshore, where labor is cheap, and regulations are almost non-existent. Also, due to

encroaching automation, the number of jobs being created is lower than we have seen in the past, while the capital investment is higher due to the complexity of the machinery. Operating this complex machinery requires an ever-increasing level of sophistication.

South Carolina’s three research universities and 16 technical colleges, along with other institutions of higher learning, play a critical role in providing a skilled work force that will increase the competitiveness of our state.

These institutions of higher learning play a vital role in attracting new companies and training workers for existing companies. Time and again, I have been in meetings with economic development prospects and consultants from around the world where representatives of the research universities and technical college system played an important role on the economic development team.

Kudos to members of the General Assembly for funding the Endowed Chairs program and the new initiatives of the technical college system. These programs are not cheap, but can we really afford not to invest in our future?

A passionate people will support these programs because they believe in investing in our state to build a work force that is enterprising and globally competitive. Our state is at a fundamental crossroads. We must sustain and accelerate our programs to stay competitive in a global economy. That means more of our passionate leaders across the state, every member of the business community, and every citizen who cares must take on more heavy lifting. It is through the passionate involvement of more caring people that we will be able to continue to move our state forward. ❖



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