

The Water Council: Water Technology Cluster Leadership

Submission No:

170

Award:

Economic Development Leadership - Leadership and Innovation

Submitter:

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Background:

What is the nature of your organization and the context in which it operates? In what professional sector does your organization operate?

The Water Council is a 501(c)3 organization in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. With water scarcity driving the global economy to realign itself, places that lead in innovating new water technologies – and mastering the complex blend of expertise needed to efficiently clean, store, process, distribute and use water – are essential. Milwaukee's leadership in water technology began in the 1800's and 1900's when water was a primary requirement for "wet" industries such as tanning, brewing, and metal products. In 2007, economic analysts realized that, although many of the founding industries had declined, over 125 authentic suppliers of water technology remained. Companies founded to move, manage, meter, monitor, maintain or mitigate water over 100 years ago, are still uniquely concentrated here.

Initiative:

Describe the initiative and why you created it. Give emphasis to key objectives and how these objectives contributed to the overall organizational objectives and strategies.

The prime intent for creation of The Water Council was to provide economic development leadership through an organizational platform supporting the water technology cluster in southeastern Wisconsin. The greater Milwaukee area contains all the elements of a true economic cluster in water technology: a high private sector location quotient; a vibrant combination of international industry leaders and small & medium size enterprises; academic research and development partners engaged with industry; and progressive public sector involvement. The Water Council's vision was to create a synergistic ecosystem supporting technology research and development; talent & workforce education; and economic growth. It has become an internationally recognized world water hub.

Collaboration (if applicable):

Describe why your project represents a collaborative effort between two or more companies and what processes you developed to ensure all participants fully participated.

The Water Council was founded, and continues to be led by two large-company chairmen who gathered like-minded industry, civic, university, government, and nonprofit leaders on the board. In 2009 they secured \$50 million in state support to expand academic investment in freshwater research. In 2012 they recruited private

sector partners to create the \$22 million Global Water Center (GWC) whose tenants, by design, include private sector of every size, academic laboratories, nonprofits, business solution providers, and shared engagement space. Key expectations for both these endeavors are to provide a product development and business acceleration ecosystem promoting growth opportunities for entities of all sizes. Water Council leaders represent private-public partnerships at their best.

Implementation:

Describe the implementation, the outcome and its impact. Give emphasis to the leadership challenges and choices made.

The geographic magnet for this world water hub encompasses the University of Wisconsin School of Freshwater Science; Global Water Center I (GWC); Global Water Center II; a 17 acre, 1 million/sf Global Water Technology Business Park; a wide variety of redevelop-able space for SME enterprises; and broad neighborhood support for mixed-use. Investors have infused over \$211 million into the Water Technology District with the majority of funding beginning in 2013. With the 98,000/sf Global Water Center fully leased inside of two years, a key strategic decision was to acquire and develop Global Water Center II, providing an additional 48,000 sf building for small and medium size water technology companies. The first new construction in the Global Water Technology Park is a 50,000/sf Corp HQ.

Lessons Learned:

Describe challenges, things you would do differently if given the chance, unexpected successes, etc.

The Water Council has been very fortunate in strong, consistent, private sector leadership from founding members, academic, and public partners. Such support has allowed for an aggressive trajectory of growth, including growing pains experienced by every start up. Staff size has grown from ½ FTE to 10 people. The pace of incoming opportunities requires routine performance at highly productive levels. Additionally, the start-up accelerator program funded by Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation has been both successful and replicated by private sector partners. This has created demand for additional space to house graduates and led to development of Global Water Center II. Though sooner than anticipated, it creates additional momentum for the Water Innovation District.

Outcome:

Describe the outcome and its impact. Show evidence of quantifiable metrics and a statement of external verification, if available. How is the project or program being monitored? What is the reporting cycle?

Statewide, the water industry employs more than 35,000, with more than 160 companies directly related to water in southeastern Wisconsin alone, and water-technology exports growing by 7.4 percent in 2014. Businesses and governments from across the world now come to Milwaukee specifically to find water technology partners and solutions: The Water Council hosted representatives from more than two dozen countries in 2014 alone, and in 2015 was highlighted by the U.S. Economic Development Administration in a tour for international economic development professionals.

The Water Council has achieved significant coverage in national and international media outlets, including Forbes—which in 2013 proclaimed Milwaukee “the Capital of Water...thanks to the work of The Water Council.”

Best Practices (if applicable):

Describe best practices that have been a result of this initiative.

The Water Council has become a model for successful public-private partnerships. Private sector leadership allows for acting quickly, boldly, and sometimes unconventionally. The result is a model public-private partnership between industry, government, and academia.

The Global Water Center (GWC) provides a space where entrepreneurs, university researchers and water technology companies interact to solve water challenges. In less than two years of operation, the building is

at capacity, with plans being finalized to create GWC II for expansion space. Entering its fourth year, the BREW (Business, Research, Entrepreneurship, Wisconsin) is a world-class accelerator attracting entrepreneurs from across the U.S. and other countries. Foreign sponsors now host a similar program in the building.

Innovation (if applicable):

An innovation brings about a paradigm shift in the way business is done in a rapidly globalizing economy. It reduces a new concept to practice and makes it a commercial success. It concerns the search for and the discovery, experimentation, development, imitation and adoption of new products, processes and organizational set-ups. Given this definition, provide a specific statement of why you believe your submission describes an innovation.

The Water Council addresses global freshwater issues by creating conditions that support innovative technologies for use by industry. The Council has put into practice an innovation and commercialization system that arms cluster members with the tools and resources to take innovative solutions from concept to prototype, pilot sites, and full production; with the ultimate goal of deploying solutions to the regions of the world most in need. A federal Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) "clusters initiative" acknowledges The Water Council model in helping aspiring regions plot a path forward. Additionally, The Water Council's leadership is reflected in recent invitations to participate in White House Economic Round-table discussions (2015) and in the White House Water Summit (2016.)

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