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# At R.I. economic conference, U.S. official cites public-private partnerships

01:00 AM EDT on Tuesday, April 13, 2010

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WARWICK — On his first visit to Rhode Island, an Obama administration economic development official said Monday that public-private partnerships are critical to developing a successful 21st-century economy in this state.

“When you look around at where you see the most success in terms of adjusting and transforming economies, you really have to have that public-private involvement,” said John Fernandez, U.S. assistant secretary of commerce for economic development. “You have to have interests and strategies that are aligned and investments made by both public and private-sector entities to execute those plans.”

Fernandez’s message, which came as part of an economic summit host by U.S. Rep. James R. Langevin at the Community College of Rhode Island, was not a new one. State leaders here have spoken of such collaborations for years.

But hearing it from a national economic development professional gave it a new sense of urgency, members of Rhode Island’s business community said.

Before joining the Obama administration, Fernandez was mayor of Bloomington, Ind., for seven years. As part of that job, he helped create a life-science sector similar to what leaders here envision for Providence’s Jewelry District, once the Route 195 relocation project is complete.

The success of the Indiana cluster was due in part to the fact that Fernandez “deliberately had co-leadership with public and private sector,” he said. Providence would be wise to adopt a similar strategy, he added.

The afternoon gathering with Fernandez and officials from the U.S. Department of Labor and Department of Education identified another key priority for Rhode Island: picking an economic development plan and sticking with it.

For too long, business leaders said, Rhode Island has waffled between paths, choosing one, then letting it fizzle amid opposition before it gains traction. Longtime business people at Monday’s session ticked off a lengthy list of past initiatives that have met such a fate.

“What I’m hearing is that one group would drive the plan, but the other group would not have ownership of it, therefore it stall[ed] out,” Fernandez said. Effective economic progress depends on a collective feeling of self-investment and a willingness to stay the course, he said.

Langevin said the onus is on him to keep ideas flowing and to host a follow-up session in the coming months.

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