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David M. Dooley/Ruth J. Simmons: R.I. has opportunity on a Texas scale

01:00 AM EDT on Wednesday, March 23, 2011

By **DAVID M. DOOLEY RUTH J. simmons**

The Ocean State does not often look to Texas for models of growth. Yet when someone somewhere has figured out how to create economic opportunity and progress out of education, health care and research — three of our strengths — it pays to go and take a look.

As the presidents of the state's primary research universities, we were pleased to accept an invitation from Governor Chafee to join Providence Mayor Angel Taveras and state Economic Development Corporation Director Keith Stokes in the first of a series of fact-finding tours focused on the economic potential of university-based research and innovation. Last month we traveled to Houston to examine how the Texas Medical Center (TMC) had grown and prospered.

There are obvious differences between TMC and Rhode Island's growing knowledge economy, but those differences are mainly in scale. We observed that the best practices that work for TMC can be applied to any similar burgeoning endeavor, and should not be ignored as we seek to develop an economic model in Providence and Rhode Island.

While at TMC, we met with its academic and corporate leadership. Our goal was to understand better how the TMC model formed, developed and thrived, and to glean possible lessons to apply locally as we seek to develop a distinctively Rhode Island economic initiative built on our greatest assets and capitalizing on our size.

We learned that by studying the Lone Star experience, Rhode Island has every opportunity to be successful in developing a knowledge-based economy, perhaps starting with a focus on health sciences and biomedical research.

We have core strengths in research, education and health care; our size fosters the capacity for ready partnerships; and we have willing, interested and inspired public, private and institutional sector leaders. Seeing the synergies that can result when institutions work in close proximity, as they do in Houston, underscores the prospects that we have within the Jewelry District, which is home to world-class

hospitals, university research, the Brown Medical School, the Rhode Island Center for Innovation and Entrepreneurship, and a number of bio-tech start-ups. Unlike Texas, the Rhode Island scale provides opportunities to build productive partnerships across our state.

To optimize these assets and spur action we must take advantage of what made TMC possible: visionary leadership, a mission-oriented focus, a culture of collaboration, supportive governance and an environment that encourages innovation.

Like the visionary leaders who founded and guided TMC, Governor Chafee and Mayor Taveras have already exhibited the potential for similarly transformative action. To be successful, they will need broad support from the public, private and institutional sectors. They must also designate capable persons empowered to lead the planning and implementation necessary to realize a coordinated vision, the necessary resources and accountability for results.

Since its founding, TMC has remained faithful to its mission of promoting the well-being of the citizens of Houston, the state, the nation and the world through high-quality patient and preventive care, research and education. Having clarity of purpose and mission as we get under way here in Rhode Island will inform everything from planning and zoning, to resource allocation, to forming strong partnerships and workforce-development strategies. We, too, can begin with a commitment to ensuring excellence in health sciences and biomedical research benefits Rhode Island, the nation and the world.

The smallest state has assets that are the envy of any state. Beyond our distinctive and plentiful natural resources, and within our 48 by 37 miles of territory, we have a rich and diverse array of colleges and universities, world-class hospitals, an active and coordinated private sector, a growing entrepreneurial business community, and access to our elected and public officials that is unimaginable in most states.

Brown University, URI and our hospitals attract nearly \$400 million in sponsored research funding to the state every year. With schools of nursing at URI, Rhode Island College and the Community College of Rhode Island, the College of Pharmacy at URI, the Brown Medical School and leadership in such areas as public health and brain science, we have complementary strengths that, together with our hospitals and other colleges and universities, can serve as the foundation of a Rhode Island Health Sciences Center.

The commitment to collaboration was clear in every interaction on our tour. For TMC, collaboration has led to strategic planning and partnerships among the member institutions, and shared resources, such as facilities. True collaboration is not easy, but it will be the key to Rhode Island's future, especially given our limited resources.

Collaboration means shared decision making, evaluating investments to optimize outcomes, and having a governance structure that encourages partnerships for progress. Collectively, the expanding and very productive research collaborations between URI and Brown, the shared governance and close working relationships among URI, RIC and CCRI, and the growing partnerships among the hospitals and universities, provide a very strong foundation for growth.

Rhode Island has an opportunity today to create an environment that encourages success for its economy and its citizens. As it has often in its history, our state faces the challenge of adapting to dynamic and evolving economic forces. Given our size, our assets and our capacity for collaboration, we have great

potential for success.

Success in establishing a model similar to the Texas Medical Center will take sublimation of individual interests to the overall good of the enterprise. It will also require vision, strong leadership, courage, perseverance and patience. Rhode Island has the requisite independence, innovation and determination to make something transformational happen.

Let's get started.

David M. Dooley is president of the University of Rhode Island and Ruth J. Simmons is president of Brown University.