

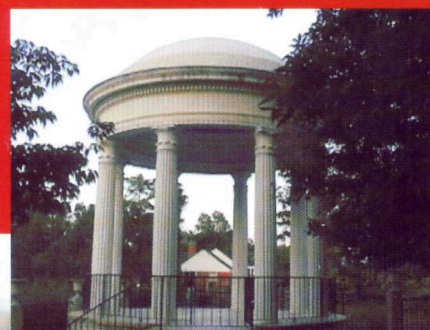
[special section]

From the Magic City to the Tech City,

# Birmingham

becomes a New-South  
technology center.

# Birmingham



by Loyd McIntosh

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# Tech Birmingham

## Putting the Plan into Action

As Alabama's largest city, Birmingham has long been the state's economic epicenter. Over the last two decades, the city has made the transition from a steel town to a medical research and development town. However, according to many of its civic leaders, Birmingham has the potential to be much more, but efforts to channel the educated workforce, technical know-how and investment capital have been unorganized and, at times, scarce.

With new industries, like Mercedes, Honda and Wachovia, setting up shop throughout the region, there is a need for greater focus on all areas of the technology business for Birmingham. Led by the efforts of a Birmingham lawyer and businessman, an organization was established to do just that. In only three short years, Tech Birmingham has already created a significant change in the city's image.

Tech Birmingham is a not-for-profit entity formed to lead, support, and coordinate the start-up, attraction, growth, retention, and expansion of technology-based businesses, investments, and jobs for the entire Birmingham metropolitan region.

Tech Birmingham is the brainchild of Jim Rotch, an attorney with Bradley, Arant, Rose and White and current pres-

ident of the Birmingham Area Chamber of Commerce. With more than 30 years of experience as a transaction attorney and business counselor and over fifteen years of experience in biotechnology, licensing and commercialization matters, Rotch was one of the first to see the need for increased organization among Birmingham's businesses, education resources and government agencies.

Rotch devoted a large part of his practice to technology transfer matters. "I came to realize that there was a need for early stage capital for emerging companies," Rotch said. "Also, I saw no real common thread and no coordination efforts between such organizations as the City of Birmingham, the Birmingham Area Chamber of Commerce, and UAB."

Rotch envisioned an organization, made up of some of the region's top industry, government and education leaders, which would aid in the development of greater cooperation between these sectors. It would also encourage investment, entrepreneurial activity and guarantee an educated work force able to lead Birmingham into a hi-tech future.

In 2001 Rotch organized and eventually served as chairman of the Birmingham Area Technology Task

Force, simply known as the BATT Force. In 2002, the BATT Force unveiled a detailed plan to ensure a healthy tech industry. Rotch also chaired the Birmingham Area Technology Leadership Alliance which is implementing the strategic plan developed by the BATT Force. The 'strategic plan' was a 24-page document which outlined in detail the steps business leaders and elected officials felt were necessary to make Birmingham a hotbed of technological activity. The report broke down the plan into six recommendations.

- Establish a permanent Birmingham area technology leadership alliance to lead, support and coordinate the start-up, attraction, growth, retention and expansion of technology-based businesses, investments, and jobs for the City of Birmingham and surrounding region.
- Create, cultivate, and maintain a technology-friendly business environment, in which ideas and opportunities flourish, and products and services are moved rapidly into the marketplace.
- Create and attract new sources of capital to fund the local development of technology.



- Develop, recruit and maintain a nationally recognized technology workforce, in conjunction with educational programs that foster entrepreneurship.

- Establish and maintain strong intergovernmental and public-private relationships.

- Work with existing economic development and business retention organizations to coordinate and facilitate an image and awareness campaign. This would include a leading-edge Internet presence – to promote internally and externally-generated technology growth in the Birmingham area, and to establish a national image of Birmingham as a vibrant and progressive community ideal as a location for technology-based businesses.

With certain industries being spread out – automotive segments in Tuscaloosa and Talladega Counties, biotechnology centered in Birmingham, and Information Technology in south Jefferson and north Shelby Counties – the leaders of BATT Force understood the importance of listening to the needs of much of central Alabama as a whole, rather than the insular world of Birmingham's city center.

"Certainly this is a regional effort. There are many people in our organization from all over the area who are active in funding and supporting Tech Birmingham," Rotch said. "One of the purposes of Tech Birmingham is to

support a technology-based business environment all over the area."

To lead Tech Birmingham, BATT Force turned to Curtis Palmer, a former associate of GreenSpring Ventures, a regional venture capital fund out of Atlanta. In addition to his venture capital experience, Palmer also has nearly 20 years of experience in the technology marketplace and 15 years in the computer aided design business. Capping a career with accolades, his work in the CAD-assisted physical planning for the 1996 Olympic Games in Atlanta contributed to what is widely recognized as one of the most organized and well-run Olympics in history. Palmer's personal vision for Tech Birmingham is for the organization to become an integral cog in the city's technology business machine. "When I started with the Olympics I wanted to make what we did was so important that they couldn't live without us," says Palmer, current president and CEO of Tech Birmingham. "With Tech Birmingham, I want people to think that nobody could imagine doing this job without us."

"Our goal is to create a cultural change in the Birmingham area with the idea that technology is in everything we do," Palmer added. "Helping companies grow and prosper and helping non-tech companies become adept at using technology are all a part of this organization's aim."

Since coming on board in 2003, Palmer has brought organizations such as UAB, the Birmingham Area Chamber of Commerce, Operation New Birmingham, the Metropolitan

Development Board, and key industry players from the city's banking and finance sectors onto the Tech Birmingham team. Now, institutions such as business incubators, the Entrepreneurial Center, and UAB's Office of the Advancement of Developing Industries, and the Metropolitan Development Board – which is one of the primary business recruitment organizations operating in Birmingham – work with each other, exchanging ideas and addressing problems in order to create a healthy technology-based business environment. The goal is to make sure Birmingham stays diverse in its interests and doesn't become a one-gadget town.

"Obviously our competitive strong suit is biotechnology – drug research and discovery, bio-defense, and medicine – but we have a very strong information technology presence in this community and the automotive industry has provided us with some opportunities as well," Rotch said. "Part of Tech Birmingham's mission is to assist in all of these areas."

"Whereas Huntsville is known as an aerospace center and also to a lesser degree for flight, Birmingham's technological landscape is much more diverse than people believe it is," Palmer said. Business incubation is obviously a huge part of the Tech Birmingham strategy. Under the watchful eye of Susan Matlock, executive director of the Entrepreneurial Center and OADI, the two programs help new technologically-based businesses grow from infancy into fully-fledged companies.



Under Matlock's leadership, emerging companies receive assistance in a number of areas. "We provide ongoing training for our tenants on subjects such as cash management as well as things like marketing and public relations," Matlock said. It's hard to argue with the success the incubators are having. All four of the finalists for the Birmingham Venture Club's 2004 Robert J. Jemison Award for Entrepreneurial excellence – TransMolecular Inc., ComFrame Software Corp., Emageon Inc., and MedMined Inc. – are companies that were incubated companies under Matlock. "I am very proud of these companies. Two came from the

EC, the other two from OADI. Each one has created nearly half a billion dollars of economic impact over the last four years," Matlock said. "I believe this is proof that the process is working."

That's good news for the city as a whole, according to Birmingham Area Chamber of Commerce President Jim Atkisson. Every success story coming out of UAB gives Atkisson the opportunity to market Birmingham as a viable city for technology companies looking to relocate or open branch offices. He says Tech Birmingham has helped make that job easier and will pay off sooner rather than later. "I think Tech Birmingham has helped the community

to focus its attention on the role of technology in Birmingham," Atkisson said.

Atkisson points to plans for a technological firm that is making preliminary plans to move to Birmingham. While the details, including the name of the company, are a closely guarded secret, Atkisson says the economic boom from this company's plans will be very significant. "The average salary is \$77,000 for this company with 130 employees. That is an annual impact of \$10 million from a company one-tenth the size of the original Mercedes plant," Atkisson said. "This shows just how powerful an impact a small company can have on the local economy." ■



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# Southern Research Institute

## Humble Beginnings to Global Influence

For more than 60 years, Southern Research Institute (SRI) has been one of Birmingham's major tech-players. Though the company is based in the Magic City, their reach is global. SRI's scientists and researchers work quietly, hidden from the spotlight, on everything from cancer research and drug discovery, to automotive materials testing and chemical defense.

With additional facilities in Frederick, Maryland and Research Triangle, North Carolina, SRI's beginnings are quite modest in comparison to the innovative work now taking place. "Southern Research was chartered in 1941 as the Alabama Research Institute. The vision of business and academic leaders at the time was that this organization could serve as research and development support for Alabama companies that couldn't afford in-house R&D programs," says Rhonda Jung, Public Relations Director for SRI. "Shortly after the charter document was signed, World War II erupted. Believing this wasn't the time to recruit the best and brightest scientific minds, the organization existed on paper for four years."

"Fundraising efforts continued, and in order to expand the geographic area served - and reach more investors - the name was changed to Southern

Research Institute," Jung added. "In 1945, Southern Research finally began operations, first conducting research for the National Peanut Council regarding the homogenization of peanut butter, and developing a mechanical system for sofa beds."

Sixty-three years later, SRI leads the way in providing contract research in such areas as biomedical research, aerospace engineering, pharmacology and toxicology and environmental research. The not-for-profit organization employs more than 600 scientists whose research has led to discoveries including the protocol for chemotherapy commonly used in treating cancer patients, five of the FDA-approved drugs to combat cancer and protect against the side-effects of treatment. SRI has also developed technology for ultrasonic spectroscopy, which is capable of non-destructive detection of hidden corrosion, evaluating composite materials and assessing adhesive bonds.

But medical research, specifically, drug discovery and development is SRI's bread and butter. Currently, SRI scientists are working toward the development of a new pair of cancer drugs now in clinical trials. They are also currently studying drugs that treat

the opportunistic diseases that affect AIDS patients, including tuberculosis and pneumonia. With the intention of unearthing a therapy that will ease the pain and misery of people afflicted with diseases worldwide, SRI's success in drug development and discovery has made them a valuable partner for pharmaceutical and biomedical companies.

In April 2004, SRI teamed up with Gilead Sciences, Inc., a biopharmaceutical company based in Foster City, California that discovers, develops and commercializes therapeutics to advance the care of patients suffering from life-threatening diseases. The two organizations worked together on an early drug discovery project designed to accelerate Gilead initiatives to identify novel drug compounds. Gilead contracted both early chemistry and the screening work to Southern Research and the progress made under the initial phase of the contract led Gilead to extend the research period.

"We are excited to work with Gilead and its outstanding staff," said John A. Secrist, III, Ph.D., vice president of the Drug Discovery Division at SRI. "Our medicinal chemistry expertise and breadth of discovery services that we can offer allowed such a broad-based project to be outsourced largely to one



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organization. The efficiencies and value that such an approach offers were clear to Gilead."

Joseph A. Maddy, Ph.D., director of research for the Organic Chemistry Department at SRI, says the chemistry staff is excited to have the opportunity to work with Gilead. "Our chemists have experience in the preparation of many classes of compounds, derived from their work on a wide variety of government and commercial projects," said Maddy. "This is exactly what is needed to achieve the ambitious goals set by Gilead, and our chemists have already made outstanding contributions to the Gilead program."

SRI is also active in areas of homeland defense, such as bioterrorism defense strategies, chemical weapon identification and neutralization, and radiological weapons detection and defense.

Other current research ongoing at SRI includes a project with the Environmental Protection Agency in evaluating the effectiveness of technologies used to reduce greenhouse gases, developing new composite materials for use in automotive applications and a wide array of commercial and military application, and is currently a global leader in the evaluation of high temperature materials for re-entry systems, rocket motors, aero propulsion and commercial applications. ■

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# UAB

## Birmingham's Tech Engine

The key piece to the Birmingham technological puzzle is without question, the University of Alabama at Birmingham. Since its emergence almost three decades ago, UAB has grown into one of the most respected and important medical colleges and research institutes in the world.

More than just a university and medical school, spitting out a few dozen fresh physicians each year, UAB is multi-dimensional conglomerate of institutions that has grown exponentially since its early days. Once an extension center for the University of Alabama, UAB only occupied a couple of buildings on Birmingham's Southside. UAB now occupies 82 city blocks and 213 buildings, with over 70 research centers, and a workforce of over 18,000 people.

It has been said that UAB stands for 'the University that Ate Birmingham.' Though this old adage may not necessarily be true it certainly does tell part of the story. UAB put Birmingham on the map.

"One out of every 10 jobs in Birmingham is in some way connected to UAB. That is an amazing figure when you stop to think about that," says Susan Matlock, President and CEO of the Entrepreneurial Center (EC) and

the Office for the Advancement of Developing Industries (OADI). "In addition, UAB brings in \$460 million in research dollars annually through the UAB Research Foundation."

The UAB Research Foundation was formed in 1987 as a non-profit corporation with the goal of identifying, assessing, protecting, and marketing commercially viable intellectual property developed via research at the university. In the 15 years since its founding, the UAB Research Foundation has amassed an incredible portfolio of accomplishments. Its successes include:

- Over 1400 invention disclosures
- A portfolio of 294 issued patents, and another 719 patent applications pending
- Completed over 300 option and licensing agreements, generating approximately \$21 million in revenues for the University
- Distributed over \$16.8 million back to the University, its inventors, and its various academic departments
- Negotiated over \$19.5 million in research agreements for the University
- Generated 33 startup companies based on its technologies

Firms such as Artherotech, a company that markets a comprehensive

cholesterol test called the Vertical Auto Profile test which can identify twice as many people at risk than routine cholesterol tests, and TransMolecular, Inc., a therapeutics biotechnology company committed to discovering, developing and commercializing drugs to diagnose and treat diseases having inadequate pharmaceutical alternatives, have become established, profitable companies by providing technology developed at UAB to the private sector. But the big questions are why and how do new drugs or medical inventions make their way into the commercial arena?

"In my opinion, colleges and universities are good at doing a lot of things," says UAB Research Foundation CEO W.S. 'Sandy' White, "but running companies isn't one of them. White oversees the operations of The UAB Research Foundation. "What we do in this office is analyze the market place and determine where to license some form of technology out. Often we license to larger firms with the capabilities to commercialize a certain drug or piece of technology. Other times we enter into agreements with entrepreneurs and license technologies out to start up companies," White explained.

When a start-up company acquires a license from UAB, most often that company is incubated at one of the





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business incubators, the EC or OADI. Overseen by Matlock, the EC and OADI help dozens of new companies in their early stages of development each year. The rules and regulations for each differ slightly – the EC is available to any type of new company while the OADI is 100 percent technology-based – but the assistance they receive is valuable to the their prospects for long-term success. “We prepare everything from press releases to their initial website. We offer affordable, flexible space. Flexibility is extremely important to an early stage entrepreneurship,” Matlock said. “They are even allowed to contract if the need to.” Through the incubation programs, new entrepreneurs are also provided with seminars on cash management, marketing and public relations and how to seminars on attracting investors and other forms of business coaching. Typically a company is given five years before they ‘graduate’ from the program and are either acquired by another company or allowed to move on into the general private sector.

It’s hard to argue with the Matlock’s success leading UAB’s business incubators. For instance, the four finalists for the 2004 Robert J. Jemison award for Entrepreneurial Excellence “All four of the finalists this year were incubated companies, two from the EC and two from OADI. And, three out of four were technology transfers from UAB,” Matlock said. “Each one has had half a billion dollars of impact over the last four years. I think this shows that the process is working.” ■



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# Emageon

## Birmingham's Crown Jewel Hits the "Road" Before IPO

Of all Birmingham's tech-based companies, the medical services company Emageon, its intelligent visual systems is creating buzz. Emageon, launched in the late 90s, is one of the nation's leading software companies. Their products and services allow physicians and health-care professionals to manage, access, and visualize multi-specialty medical content across the enterprise using advanced visualization tools.

Since its early days in the Entrepreneurial Center, Emageon has grown rapidly. This company is just one of the many promising new tech companies with an innovative idea and an intelligent, committed staff. It is the current crown jewel in Tech Birmingham's crown; proof that the system is working precisely as it was designed.

"Emageon really is the shining example of how a company should grow in this system," says Tech Birmingham president Curtis Palmer. "They started out as an incubated company through the Entrepreneurial Center, before graduating into the open market. They eventually acquired an existing company (UltraVisual Medical Systems) and employ several hundred people in two locations."

Emageon's financial performance has been staggering. Last fall, Emageon announced that its current contracts were generating a backlog in excess of \$100 million. In addition, the company has recorded a compound annual growth rate in revenue of 201% from 2001-2003. Its acquisition with UltraVisual was a significant growth phase for the Birmingham-based company which now has satellite offices in Madison, Wisconsin.

"Our merger with UltraVisual Medical Systems last summer added synergy and strength to our growth platform," said Chuck Jett, Emageon's chairman and CEO. "The market was eager for a competitively priced visualization solution that extends functionality throughout the healthcare enterprise."

The company was recently awarded the Robert J. Jemison, Jr. Award for Entrepreneurial Excellence – an award given by the Venture Club of Birmingham – and has consistently attracted investors since the company was launched almost five years ago. However, in November 2004, Emageon made another significant step in its growth, announcing it will soon be a publicly traded company.

Emageon filed a registration statement with the Securities and Exchange Commission for a proposed initial public offering of its common stock. All shares to be included in the offering will be sold by the company. Wachovia Capital Markets, LLC – which recently merged with Birmingham-based Southtrust – and Piper Jaffray & Co. are the joint book-running managers of the underwriting group. Raymond James & Associates, Inc. and Friedman, Billings, Ramsey & Co., Inc. are co-managers.

Emageon's quick success is a reflection of the technology developed by the company's staff. They have developed advanced technologies that give physicians and other health care providers easy access to medical information and images that were unheard of just a few years ago.

"In less than five years, our company has established relationships with over 250 hospitals, which perform approximately 20 million annual radiological procedures," said Jett. "Our belief is that our standards-based approach has created a scalable platform that works equally well for a broad range of facilities, from regionally-based community hospitals to large, sophisticated IDNs that span multiple states." ■





## 365, Inc.

### All Futbol All The Time

**3**65 Inc. was one of the few web-based companies that not only managed to survive the dot-com bust of the 1990s, but actually thrived during those turbulent times. Rather than relying totally on investment capital and advertising revenue, 365 Inc.'s business plan created multiple streams of revenue through retail sales, outside contract work and advertising, proving that an Internet-based company can be profitable.

Launched in 1998 by Bernard Frei, a native Australian with a background in network television production, 365 Inc. provides soccer and rugby news on its two award-winning websites, [www.rugbyrugby.com](http://www.rugbyrugby.com) and [www.soccer365.com](http://www.soccer365.com). The company also offers soccer and rugby equipment and gear as well as officially licensed team merchandise through its two internet stores, [www.worldsoccershop.com](http://www.worldsoccershop.com) and [www.worldrugbyshop.com](http://www.worldrugbyshop.com). Through these two internet stores, browsers can find everything from official Chicago Fire jerseys from the MLS, to official national team jerseys for Zaire and Tibet.

Furthermore Frei, who worked for Fox broadcasting in New York for a time, has established agreements to provide soccer and rugby scores for other outlets including Fox Sports and Amazon.com.

"Since 1998 we've continued growing. We've never had a down year," says Frei. "We were the first really serious rugby website and we have readers from all over the world."

Rugbyrugby.com was the first website launched by 365 Inc. and remains the flagship site of 365 Inc. The site quickly became the most read rugby news site in North America and one of the world's most successful rugby websites. The soccer website arrived in 2000 and currently has 200,000 unique visitors each month while generating three million page views. In 2001, 365 Inc. even received a mention in *Sports Illustrated* calling Soccer365 a 'sprightly website bringing European inventiveness to reporting on the U.S. game.'

The amount of people visiting the rugby and soccer news sites is obviously attractive to advertisers, generating revenue, but the company's success has really come through merchandise sales. The niche 365 Incorporated has carved for itself along with its status as one of the trusted outlets of news and information has spurred retail sales, something of an anomaly in the world of cyber space.

"Samford University did a study for us and found that 40 percent of sales on one of our stores came directly

from one of our news websites," Frei said. "That's a very good percentage of people buying merchandise who were drawn to us because of the quality of our information."

Frei established his business in Birmingham for several reasons, one primary reason owing to the Magic City being his wife's hometown. However, he quickly realized Birmingham had a lot to offer in terms of being a tech friendly city with an abundance of talent. He currently has 25 people on staff in Birmingham and as well as contributors from across the globe.

"We have a couple of journalists based here and we have about 35 freelancers from all over the world who report on soccer and rugby on a 24-hour basis," Frei said. "My soccer and rugby editor, David Fleenor, has been here since 1999. He coordinates everything for us and has done a great job."

The company also utilizes some interesting tools for its information distribution, including a archive program that allows users to research rugby scores, team histories and player biographies from as far back as 1873. With such a diverse collection of services and retail option, 365 Inc. may just provide the blueprint for other companies as the internet-base business community continues its rebound. ■





# Food Source Lures

## So Good You Can Eat 'Em

**F**ood Source Lures is proof that technological innovations can come in a variety of shapes, sizes and even colors. A Birmingham-based manufacturing company, Food Source Lures has raised eyebrows around the world with its line of edible fishing lures.

The company is led by Ed Rogers, former lawyer and venture capitalist, who, along with a few partners, established the company to market and manufacture bait products based on technology developed at Auburn University.

The story begins in 2000 when a man named Doug Ollis realized his dog had eaten several packs of soft plastic 'jelly worm' fishing lures. After his dog became sick from his ill-advised snack, Ollis had a revelation – edible fishing lures. "Doug realized that there had to be a way to make a fishing lure that is made out of food instead of plastic," says Rogers. "Not only are they unhealthy to animals, but plastic lures are a big pollutant."

Ollis took his idea to the Department of Fisheries and Allied Aquaculture at Auburn where research began. The problem was then taken to Dr. Russell Wright of the Food and Nutrition

Department at Auburn. Dr. Wright and his staff came up with a gelatin-based material that could be molded and colored to resemble soft plastic lures, but were harmless to fish and other wildlife and are biodegradable.

Tests showed the lures were not only successful in catching fish, but actually fed and encouraged growth among fish that took the bait and weren't caught. Thinking he had a winner on his hands after learning about the lures through acquaintances at Auburn, Rogers entered into a licensing agreement with Auburn and set up a small manufacturing facility in Birmingham in mid-2003.

"We made them throughout the summer. We had molds built for the lures and contracted with an outside manufacturer here in Alabama," Rogers said. "We sold the first one in December 2003, even though we didn't start marketing until this year."

In under a year, Food Source Lures have become a big seller internationally in Japan, Sweden, South Korea and Spain and other nations who have cracked down on environmentally unfriendly fishing products. Rogers has also entered into an agreement with Cabela's, a hunting, fishing and outdoor

gear company with \$1.5 billion in sales in 2003. HE says that for now, they intend to supply their lures to retail outlets as the company grows. "Right now, we're selling to wholesalers and distributors and not doing too much direct selling ourselves," he said.

The technology has the potential to be used in other areas of wildlife management and control. Since the formulation can be infused with any scent and made to resemble any number of food sources, Rogers said they are looking at using the product to introduce rabies vaccines to help control the disease among animal populations.

For now, Rogers says he believes the company's line of environmentally friendly, edible fishing lures has a great opportunity to 'take a bite' out of the \$5 billion per year fishing lure market, even if he has to resort to some extraordinary sales strategies to get his point across. "The lures are not only edible by fish, but humans as well and has been approved by the FDA for human consumption," Rogers said. "Many times during sales pitches, in order to convince someone that it's safe, I'll eat the lures right then and there. That usually gets their attention." ■





# Metropolitan Development Board

## Cultivating the Next IT Boom

For Birmingham's tech scene to grow, not only are entrepreneurship important, but equally important are existing businesses selecting Birmingham as a viable site for a new office, laboratory, or warehouse facility. Recruiting new business opportunities to Birmingham is the job of the Metropolitan Development Board (MDB), a private, non-profit economic development organization. Established in 1971, the primary goal of the MDB is to promote Birmingham's Metropolitan area as a low cost, high return business location.

Ted vonCannon, CEO of the MDB, says that technology-based businesses are a key priority of the board's activi-

ties. When talking about anything concerning technology in Birmingham – particularly medicine and biotechnology – conversation almost always turns to the shining jewel on the city's Southside, UAB.

"The engine that drives the train is UAB, without question," says vonCannon. "The state of Alabama has 85 biotech companies and 70 of them are located in the Birmingham area." Like many of the business development organizations throughout the region, vonCannon believes there is more potential for technology in Birmingham than simply biotechnology. One of his duties is to promote Birmingham's positive attributes, such as the low cost of

living and highly educated workforce, and produce an image akin to other regions, such the Research Triangle in North Carolina or Austin, Texas, which has seen an incredible boom in companies during the last 25 years.

"We have to be the missionaries, if you will, to convince business leaders to look at Birmingham as a viable location for their company," he said. "However, it is also important to recruit the right types of businesses to the area. Birmingham's image was built on biotechnology. However, other opportunities are ripe for exploration, like information technology, engineering and design."





## Operation New Birmingham

In 1957, downtown business leaders joined with City and County officials to challenge the new and growing competition from the suburbs. They formed a public-private partnership that would eventually be known as Operation New Birmingham. For nearly half a century this group has brought the business community together with local government to promote the growth and development of Birmingham's City Center which includes the Southside and Lakeview areas, as well as the traditional downtown.

ONB is the only organization that focuses solely on the City Center. There have been a series of City Center Master Plans that have guided ONB's efforts over the years. ONB has developed measurable goals and strategies based upon these plans. For instance, five years ago, ONB set out to increase the amount of commercial space in the City Center by one million square feet, increase the number of loft apartments and condominiums by 1,000, and develop additional Federal offices in the City Center. These goals have been surpassed, and ONB is pursuing a new strategic plan based upon the recently unveiled City Center Master Plan.

New goals include 2,500 additional apartments and condominiums, three or four new office buildings like One Federal Place and Concord Center, a 14-acre Railroad Park, expansion of UAB to the Railroad Park, and other innovative proposals. ONB will coordinate the implementation of these exciting concepts through cooperation between the public and private sectors during the next five years.

ONB's new strategic plan is called Implementation Now! And its goal is to carry out the Master Plan. ONB is seeking pledges to support its efforts over the next five years from businesses, developers, property owners and others interested in a bright future for the City Center. The group's business support is matched by the City and County governments.

ONB assists developers access incentives such as short-term, low-interest "float" loans, SBA loans, and historic tax credits. In addition, ONB helps developers and businesses with all aspects of the development process from finding buildings through financing, permitting, and the ribbon cutting. ONB is a one-stop shop for development in the City Center.

ONB's small professional staff works under the direction of a Board of Directors led this year by Marsha Johnson of the Alabama Power Company and other business leaders.

"We went through the IT boom and believe that it will come back again very strong. We also have a lot of banking and insurance companies and attached to those is the IT industry that needs to be investigated further," vonCannon said. "The automotive industry is the largest we've seen move into the region in 30 years, since the dawn of the textile industry," vonCannon added. "Automotive is a bread-and-butter industry, but if we are going to go down that road, we had better be looking at design and engineering."

The MDB has the entire Birmingham region in mind when recruiting business, serving Blount, Jefferson, Shelby, St. Clair, Bibb, Chilton and Walker Counties; a very large and sprawling metropolitan area. vonCannon says he would like to see more organization on the state level to help recruit and diversify Alabama's business community in the future. In the meantime, the MDB will continue to focus on its mission. ■

