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— UP FRONT —



Central Michigan University's Center for Applied Research & Technology incubator in the Mt. Pleasant SmartZone.

Photo by Jeremy W. Steele

CMU aims to expand high-tech SmartZone

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Central Michigan University is exploring a possible expansion of its state-sanctioned SmartZone beyond its 300-acre office and industrial park.

University and economic development officials would like to use the incentive tool to spur high-tech projects outside of the university's Center for Applied Research & Technology business park, CMU President Michael Rao said.

The idea is similar to the structure of the Lansing Regional SmartZone, a partnership between Lansing, East Lansing, Michigan State University and other organizations to create several noncontiguous areas to incubate high-tech startup companies.

The Grand Rapids, Ann Arbor-Ypsilanti and Oakland County Automation Alley SmartZones also include noncontiguous areas.

"We're trying to move toward the same concept," Rao said.

Michigan has 11 designated SmartZones, collaborations between universities, local governments, industry and others to stimulate growth of technology-related businesses. The zones, which aim to create clusters of specialized businesses, can tap into funding through tax increment financing mechanisms to pay for infrastructure improvements related to high-tech projects.

Expanding the Mt. Pleasant zone could spread new development

and high-tech businesses around the community and encourage development projects in areas that badly need it.

The CART SmartZone is home to a business incubator aimed at nanotechnology-related firms. Officials broke ground last month on a \$5-million, 17,000-square-foot expansion to add wet lab space to the building.

Businesses that want to build a relationship with CMU and its intellectual capital through the SmartZone now have to locate in the university's park, said Brent Case, technology and business development manager for **CMU Research Corp.**, a not-for-profit arm that manages CART and its research incubator for the university.

"The idea is to break out of the box," Case said.

An expansion of the SmartZone would have to be approved by the **Michigan Economic Development Corp.**, which administers the state SmartZone program, and the **Department of Treasury**, which must sign off on the tax capture program, said Roselyn Zator, MEDC's director of SmartZones and business accelerators.

The first SmartZone was created in 2001. Each SmartZone is unique and has its own group of local partners and focus, Zator said.

"It has generated jobs and companies," she said of the program. "The value added of this whole program is the buzz. It's the culture change. It's the fact that we're developing this high-tech activity at these SmartZones.

"It's not a dictate from the state. We're not telling them how to do this. They're all doing this on their own and it's benefiting their region."



Rao