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By [Peter Panepento](#)

Staff writer

The wooing season is under way for business owners such as Erie Plastics president and CEO Paul C. "Hoop" Roche.

Roche relies heavily on tech-savvy young workers to help bring new ideas and applications to his Corry-based plastics company, but says the competition among local firms for new college graduates is intense. Most of the region's top engineering students from Penn State Behrend, for example, have already lined up jobs -- months before they receive their diplomas.

"The recruitment of Penn State graduates from Erie is very high. There really isn't enough to go around," Roche said. "The most important thing is just adding capacity."

After 13 years of planning and lobbying, Penn State Behrend is finally getting that added capacity through a \$30 million capital budget allocation by Gov. Tom Ridge that will pay for the construction of a 160,000-square-foot Research and Economic Development Center at the college.

The allocation, which was announced Thursday at a news conference at Behrend's Knowledge Park, is the largest discretionary state capital investment in Erie County history.

The center, dubbed the RED-C, will house Behrend's School of Business and its School of Engineering and Engineering Technology, as well as the Pennsylvania Technical Assistance Program, Ben Franklin Technology Partners and the Plastics Technology Deployment Center.

It also will allow researchers and students from the region's other colleges and universities to have access to its equipment and resources.

The new building will be located on the east side of Jordan Road in Harborcreek Township, bridging Behrend's main campus with Knowledge Park, according to Behrend officials. Preliminary plans put the center on track for a January 2004 opening.

Penn State Behrend Provost John Lilley, who first proposed the idea for the high-tech training center in 1987, says the facility fits with the college's goal of working with Erie-based businesses to fill their training needs and offering its students business experience to complement their undergraduate studies.

"All of the programs we do here are based on what businesses tell us they want," Lilley said. "I just think this is going to push us to the next step."

The RED-C project was put on track for state funding, in part, because it earned the support of

the Erie Conference's Community Coalition, which has twice designated it as a high priority on its capital projects wish list.

Business leaders say the new center will help Erie develop a larger base of younger, skilled workers and, in turn, will help fuel new business in the region.

Those goals mesh well with Ridge's agenda.

The governor said Thursday that one of his biggest goals for his final two years in office is to reverse the flight of young talent from the state.

"If we're serious about continuing to grow in the state, we need to attract and retain young people," Ridge said. "The foundation is in place. Now we just have to keep our young people here."

Ridge said the new center is a key piece of a larger effort that will focus on reversing Pennsylvania's brain drain by attracting and incubating high-tech businesses. Part of that effort includes developing young talent that will add brainpower to existing companies and who will start up their own companies here.

To do that, Ridge says he wants to develop programs that will bring together young workers, educational institutions and private companies.

"There is nothing more important to Pennsylvania's future than to retain the people who are coming out of secondary schools and our colleges and universities," Ridge said in an interview following Thursday's announcement.

For Behrend, the new center will also ease a space crunch that has many of its business professors working and teaching out of temporary trailers. The tight quarters have stalled Behrend's attempts to earn an accreditation that would help its efforts to recruit top-level students, officials say.

That space crunch also has stalled Behrend's plans to offer programs in information sciences and technology programming, which includes computer engineering, computer science and software engineering.

Behrend plans to offer those programs at the RED-C, Lilley said, allowing it to complement existing programs at Gannon University, Edinboro University of Pennsylvania and Mercyhurst College.

At the same time, officials at those institutions say that the RED-C opens the door for new programs linking local colleges and universities with businesses.

"It provides a great opportunity for significant collaboration," said Bruce Whitehair, Edinboro's vice president of development and marketing. "With that kind of support, the results will be significant."

For Roche, those results include access to more well-trained young workers -- the kind of workers that are needed to bring new ideas and skills to his business.

"As business leaders, we are very aware that our success is dependent on technology and innovation," Roche said. "We rely heavily on local graduates. They are driving us to be a more high-tech company."

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