Officials tout value of incubators, technology parks

By Chris Bishop Staff writer | Posted: Thursday, November 3, 2011 12:00 am

Business incubators and technology parks are having an impact on the South Jersey economy, albeit in a low-profile way.

Small businesses are also going to be the source of new jobs in the struggling economy.

Those were two of the key points that speakers stressed Wednesday at the last economic forum of the year hosted by the Burlington County Chamber of Commerce. The event was held at Laurel Hall on the Mount Laurel campus of Burlington County College.

“We got into the incubator business before a lot of other folks,” said Burlington County College President Robert Messina, a guest speaker. “We started it without fanfare and without a lot of help.”

Messina has led the county college for the past 25 years and will retire Feb. 29.

He said the college incubator, located not far from the site of Wednesday’s meeting, had developed a number of small businesses in recent years, many with a technology focus. And many of these firms are generating jobs as well as revenue.

“Jobs and the economy are going to be talked about for a long time,” said the Mount Holly resident. “Lockheed, GE, that’s not where the jobs are. It’s in small business.”

The college’s 20,000-square-foot High Technology Incubator, which opened in 1998, was followed by a 12,000-square-foot Life Science building nine years later. Successful tenants over the years have included a candy company, an accounting firm, and several specialized technology companies.

The incubator facilities benefit startup companies because of lower rent and a good location near major highways, Messina said.

Because the incubator is 100 percent wired, each firm has access to telephone, fax and data connections. It also provides a technology library, conference rooms and fax services, college officials said.

In his discussion Wednesday, Shreekanth Mandayam, executive director of the South Jersey Technology Park, said one of the challenges is to focus on technology.

The technology park, on Route 322 in Mantua, Gloucester County, was established by Rowan University. Its goal is to lead the economic revitalization of South Jersey through an integrated program of science and technology initiatives.

Mandayam, a Pitman resident, said the technology park opened in 2008 and started receiving businesses in 2009.

Among the park’s success stories, Mandayam said, is entrepreneur Alencon Systems, a solar power conversion company.

Alencon, which was created through research at Rowan University, is a spinoff of Inductotherm, a Westampton company owned by Henry Rowan, after whom the college is named.

Speaker Margaret Brennan-Tonetta, associate director of the New Jersey Agricultural Experiment Station for Rutgers University, touted the strengths of the college’s Food Innovation Center in Bridgeton.

She called the center “a unique” business incubation and economic development program, which is part of the New Jersey Agricultural Experiment Station. The center provides business and technology expertise to startup and established food and agriculture businesses in New Jersey, she said.

Brennan-Tonetta said more than 1,200 companies and entrepreneurs have been helped since the center opened in in 2000. Those benefitting included farmers, startup food companies and retail and food service establishments.

In addressing the issue of intellectual property, attorney Gary Colby with the Philadelphia law firm of Dilworth Paxson, said patent law changed recently and business people, especially inventors, need to know about that.

In September, President Barack Obama signed into law a bill that overhauls the nation’s patent system for the first time in 50 years. The America Invents Act encourages inventors to “get to the patent office first,” Colby said.

“If you get to the patent office first, you get the patent even if you aren’t the first to invent it,” Colby explained.

Under the law, it would be easier for even a small company to challenge a patent, he said.

“You can fight with Intel now,” he said. “You may not win ... and Intel can go after you.”

Attorney Audrey Winzinger, an officer of the Winzinger recycling and demolition company, said Wednesday’s forum was instructive and interesting.

“I didn’t know the South Jersey Technology Park existed,” said Winzinger, whose company is based in Hainesport. “This was great ... It was great to learn something you didn’t know about.”

About 55 business people and educators attended Wednesday’s economic forum.