

Tech Conference Has Long Corporate, Fed Agency Roster

By Jason Millman

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David Patch knows a good opportunity when he sees one.

As the president of an East Hartford-based technology company, he knows that the national Small Business Innovation Research conference to be held in Hartford next week (Nov. 12-14) is just about as good as any.

Patch, a former Navy man who started up three SBIR companies in Maine before coming out of retirement last year to help run RSL Fiber Systems with CEO Giovanni Tomasi, said there is a lot at stake at Hartford's first national SBIR conference.

With 11 federal agencies and a roster of big corporations in attendance, Patch and Tomasi will have the perfect setting to explore ways to expand their company's fiber optic lighting technology beyond its currently exclusive use on Navy ships.

Small Biz Set Aside

"I really understand the value of the SBIR program to a company like us," Patch said. The SBIR program, created in 1982, requires that a number of federal agencies set aside a portion of their research budgets for investment in small business technology companies.

This year, about \$2.5 billion will be given in grants to small businesses through 11 SBIR agencies, which include the Department of Defense, the Department of Health and Human Services, the Department of Energy and NASA, to name a few.

High-tech companies will be eligible for grants of up to \$100,000 or \$750,000, depending on their stage of development.

Given the poor state of the economy, private venture capital funding will be harder to come by for small companies and startups in need of cash. That makes government funding that much more competitive, said Stephen Andrade, program manager for Massachusetts-based Battelle Technology Practice Partnership, which helps match private companies with the public sector. As funds get tighter, small companies will need more federal and corporation partnerships, he said.

“As the financial markets go through the current constraints, it will be harder for companies to get money,” Andrade said. “SBIR is going to become more important because that money’s not going away.”

Making Connections

A full roster of attendees will help small businesses make connections with public and private funders. Federal laboratories, nine Connecticut universities, several foreign governments and large multinational corporations, including General Electric, Johnson & Johnson, and Northrup Grumman will attend the conference.

United Technologies Corp. and its subsidiaries will also be present, including Sikorsky, which held an online chat with other attendees a few weeks ago to get a sense of what would be on display at the conference.

“We’ve got to make these connections so when these technologies mature, we’re in a position to transition them into products,” said Bill Harris, program manager for Sikorsky.

National Model

The opportunity for early networking distinguishes the upcoming conference from others, said Deb Santy, director of state’s SBIR office. “No other national conference has done networking to this extent, so I think it’s going to set an example,” Santy said.

In the months leading up to the conference, companies have posted descriptions on the conference’s Web site about either their technologies or the type of partnerships they are seeking. Feedback has been positive so far, she said.

As of last week, 650 people registered for the conference, one-third of which are from Connecticut, according to Santy. She expects a total of 800 people to attend.

At such large national conferences, there is a level of home-field advantage, according to Lewis Attardo, who organized the last SBIR national conference in Orlando in May. “They are able to drive in without taking on the expense and time away from business,” he said.