

New Colorado-Israeli council forges economic strategy

BY P.J. DINNER AND ERIN JOHANSEN

DENVER BUSINESS JOURNAL

The newly created Colorado-Israeli Economic Development Council met with metro Denver business and political leaders at the end of October in an effort to foster business relationships between the two entities.

Local business people established the council earlier this year to explore opportunities between Colorado and Israel.

While folks on both sides of the ocean will explore any mutually beneficial opportunities, the local council is focusing on industries that are important to both regions, including water storage and technology, biotechnology and health care, said Rob Schwartz, executive director of the council.

"Being part of the global economy makes companies think strategically, and partnering makes a whole lot of sense," Schwartz said. "Israel is the entryway to the Middle and Far East. There are incredible opportunities and it's a two-way street."

While acknowledging there are political and security concerns around doing business with Israel, members of the delegation said the region will be quiet someday and that will provide even more opportunity for global and regional businesses.

To foster the development of business relationships between Colorado and Israel, the council held meetings in Denver from Oct. 29-31 that involved Zvi Vapni, deputy consul general of the Israeli consulate in Los Angeles; Doron



Denver Mayor John Hickenlooper (left) meets with Zvi Vapni and Doron Abrahami.

Abrahami, Israel's council for economic affairs, also with the Los Angeles consulate; and metro Denver leaders from business, government, economic development and industry.

The Colorado-Israeli EDC has recruited seven board members and is seeking as many as 15, Schwartz said. Several of these board members participated in the meetings.

Julie Rubin, an international trade specialist with the Mayor's Office of Economic Development and International Trade, also sits on the board and participated in some of the meetings.

"Our belief is that there are synergies in industries, competencies and demand here and in Israel," said John Stearns, president of Golden software company Generation21 and a founding board member of the local council.

Specifically, there's an opportunity in

the Ramat Negev region in southern Israel, which is underdeveloped and historically has been agricultural, Stearns said. "There's a tremendous language talent there," he said, because Jewish people from many parts of the globe have settled there.

During the three days, the Israeli-Colorado group met with Rep. Bob Beauprez, R-Colo.; the Colorado Alliance for Bioengineering; Denver Mayor John Hickenlooper; the Denver Metro Chamber of Commerce; Adams County Economic Development; the South Metro Denver Chamber of Commerce; and the Aurora Chamber of Commerce.

Encouraged by Vapni to visit his country, Hickenlooper laughingly said, "We just got through dealing with a \$70 million budget deficit, and my suspicion is that if I went off to Israel in the near future, I probably wouldn't be welcome back."

Still, Hickenlooper warmed to the subject of Israel-Denver cooperation and the potential for partnerships.

There are a few sectors in particular that lend themselves to economic cooperation, said Abrahami, whose territory with the Los Angeles consulate covers Arizona, Colorado, Hawaii, Nevada, Utah, Wyoming and Southern California. Environmental technologies top the list.

"When we are speaking about environment technologies, we are speaking about water and about renewable energies," Abrahami said. He suggested that his office would be pleased to assist in establishing an annual environmental technologies conference in Denver, similar to

one it presents in California. Such a conference would "create a showcase of technologies and bring the people here," he said.

Water is a key concern in the arid climate of Israel, where most of the rivers have been polluted for years and rehabilitation projects are either under way or scheduled. It's an area worth exploring for Denver companies specializing in this type of cleanup, Abrahami said.

"This is an opportunity to learn. The key here is we have to remind our members not to be parochial," said Bill Becker, president and CEO of Adams County Economic Development.

Colorado-Israeli EDC board member Peter Neuberger, president of Englewood distribution company MPI, said Israel represents a good market for his company.

"We've been growing quickly and see this as an opportunity to strategically expand," Neuberger said.

"We're excited about the traction we're getting and some of the exciting things that are in the pipeline," said Schwartz, noting that National Jewish Medical and Research Center has joined the board of the Colorado-Israeli EDC. "We're having serious discussions about the hospital's disease-management program and creating synergies that we think will generate jobs in Israel and enhance the program's revenues here."

"A down economy means you redouble your efforts for opportunity," Becker said. "That's when economic development groups can show they are of merit. Every legitimate opportunity is good for us."