

OPINION

Jefferson coalition leads the way on ensuring prosperity is widespread

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U.S. Rep. Ro Khanna speaks at the History Boy Theater on Dec. 8, 2018, in Jefferson as tech leaders from Silicon Valley announce partnerships with Pillar Technology in an effort to bring rural jobs to Iowa. (Photo: Brian Powers/The Register)

Something special is happening in Jefferson, Iowa, and the country should pay attention. An inspired coalition of government, civic and industry leaders is working toward a local solution to one of this country's most vexing challenges: ensuring that prosperity is widely distributed.

This coalition has a bold goal: making Jefferson (pop. 4,200) a technology hub that's an attractive place for its young people to live for decades to come. If any U.S. community can do this, it's Jefferson — with its abundant broadband, new funding for schools, emerging tech accelerator, clean energy, accessible health care, quality community colleges and support from the private sector.

And Jefferson isn't afraid to ask for help. That's how the two of us got involved, when its leaders reached out to see whether Silicon Valley could play a role in the community's transformation. A coalition focused on bringing opportunity to Greene County began to take shape, beginning with the opening of a career academy to train software engineers and a jobs partnership called the Forge. The project was unveiled in December and received coverage from the Register, The Guardian and other news outlets.

This work continued this month when educators from The Tech Interactive, San Jose's tech-focused science center, conducted the first of several professional development seminars with 52 teachers in Greene County's K-12 schools, in a project funded partly by Corteva Agriscience. The Tech specializes in "design challenge learning," a combination of project-based learning and engineering design that helps students develop the problem-solving skills necessary for 21st century jobs.

In addition to the partnership with The Tech, Corteva is funding 25 scholarships to enable local students to emerge from college debt-free and tech-career ready.

It's too early to say whether Jefferson can become a true tech hub, but we are doing all we can to help. If Jefferson succeeds, it can be a model for other rural communities to transform their economies — and the lives of their residents — too.

Iowa's leaders speak with hope about the emergence of a "Silicon Prairie" in their state. If that happens, it will be because leaders in places like Jefferson have come to believe that the world's great needs can be their great opportunities, and because they've made the sacrifices necessary to seize those opportunities. If other communities follow Jefferson's lead, who knows: Maybe technology can bind our country together, rather than drive us apart.

Ro Khanna represents California's 17th District, in the heart of Silicon Valley, in Congress. Tim Ritchie is the president and CEO of The Tech Interactive in San Jose, Calif.