

Governor: High-tech hookup necessary

State will benefit, Huckabee says

BY DAVID SMITH
ARKANSAS DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE

Gov. Mike Huckabee said Wednesday he will ask legislators next year to invest \$10 million to connect Arkansas to a high-speed fiber-optic network that links university researchers across the country.

Huckabee, speaking in Little Rock at the Strategic Policy Forum sponsored by the University of Arkansas System, said Arkansas is one of the few Southern states that doesn't already have a link to the system, known as the eCorridor.

The nearest connections to Arkansas are in Tulsa and Baton Rouge.

"If we want to reap significant things, we must sow significant things," Huckabee said. "If we want high-tech, high-paying jobs, we must sow the seeds that will bring them. And nothing will bring it like the investment in research dollars."

The eCorridor connects key research institutions across the country. Having such a link would allow scientific researchers to access enormous amounts of information immediately from other universities, Huckabee said. It also would be a major incentive to attract high-tech businesses because the eCorridor would allow them to relay intricate material to their other offices, Huckabee said.

Such transfers of information can't be done on the fastest current connections on the Internet, he said.

"Quite frankly, we can't live without it, if we are going to compete for the kinds of jobs that require those sorts of connections," Huckabee said.

The state needs "to plant seeds" even if results are not seen quickly, Huckabee said.

The eCorridor Project is an initiative of the Southern Governors' Association. At a recent meeting of the governors, Huckabee said he noticed that Arkansas and Mississippi are among the few states who do not yet have a connection to the eCorridor.

The investment in the eCorridor is "absolutely" necessary, said Gary Underwood, deputy chief information officer for the state of Arkansas, in a telephone interview.

"It will have educational, business and economic benefits" for Arkansas, said Underwood, who served on an eCorridor advisory committee of representatives from 13 Southern states.

Using the high-speed connections of the eCorridor is like going from a two-lane black top highway to a four-lane interstate.

"This will keep us from being late to get on the four-lane interstate," Underwood said.

Huckabee told representatives of business and higher education that for Arkansas to have a stronger work force and higher-paying jobs, it first must improve the educational level of its residents.

Arkansas has a 38 percent graduation rate from college, the lowest in the country, Huckabee said.

Much of what Huckabee said about education and high-tech jobs agreed with findings from a Milken Institute report that was released Wednesday, said Jeff Collins, director of the Center for Business and Economic Research at the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville.

Collins was one of six authors of the 298-page Milken report, which was undertaken through a \$205,000 grant from the Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation. The report shows that Arkansas remains near the bottom of most gauges of the high-tech economy, and how the trend can be reversed.

Huckabee said he has not read the report, but has seen an analysis of the report prepared by his staff.

The report "gives us another reason to accelerate our own focus on improving higher education and the graduation level," Huckabee said.

This story was published Thursday, September 23, 2004