

Times West Virginian
17 June 2004

Goal: 'Silicon Valley of biometrics'

MORGANTOWN

By Misty Poe Phillips

Governor delivers 'soft sales pitch' to European leaders

Bob Wise has worn a lot of hats during his political career — state senator, congressman and governor.

Wednesday, he played the salesman.

European leaders in the biometrics industry gathered this week at the Radisson Hotel in Morgantown for "Opening New Markets and Enhancing Competitiveness" — a conference thought to be the largest gathering of foreign-based companies in the state.

Biometrics is the science of identifying a person based on physical characteristics, like the iris of the eye, the contour of the hand or fingerprints.

North Central West Virginia is quickly becoming the hub for the nation's biometrics industry. The state's biometrics assets stretch from a degree program at West Virginia University to several companies that use the technology at the I-79 High-Tech Park in Fairmont to the Department of Defense's Biometrics Fusion Center in Bridgeport — and beyond.

"My message is that we are going to become the Silicon Valley of biometrics," Wise said. "We've developed a real confidence in the partnership with the biometrics industry, and this started about 10 years ago. We're not Johnny-come-latelys to this."

The conference was hosted by the West Virginia High Technology Consortium Foundation and the West Virginia Development Office and drew industry leaders from England, Denmark, Ireland, Germany, Italy and Sweden

"We're out there saying, 'Look. We have a lot of assets in West Virginia. We have a lot of resources in West Virginia. We want to be the biometrics hub of the U.S.,'" said Patrick Gregg of the WVHTC.

Gov. Wise gave what he called a "soft sales pitch" for West Virginia to the leaders during a key-note address Wednesday.

Not only are there several supporting biometrics initiatives and companies in the state, Wise said, but other opportunities that would make locating a company here an easy transition. There are research-and-development as well as high-growth and intensity tax credits offered to businesses.

Two years ago, voters in the state also approved the tax increment financing measure. The program allows local communities to use increases in B&O taxes to pay for supporting infrastructure improvements as a way to draw businesses to the area.

The state's Gateway Program, an arm of the development office, also matches foreign companies with accountants, bankers, lawyers and consultants who have experience with international business affairs, he said.

Dr. Yorck Otto, president of the Germany-based IBCOL Inc., was among the several business leaders to attend this week's conference. Otto said that in West Virginia, he believes there is a "very clear and very wise concept behind the biometrics community here."

"My feeling is that whatever these people are doing here, they are doing it not only with brains, but also with heart," Otto said. "That

Times West Virginian

17 June 2004

is the clear impression that I have.”

With headquarters near Munich, Germany, IBCOL opened a marketing office in Washington, D.C., earlier this year. The company has been involved in biometrics technology since 1994. Its product SIMPLE is a fully automated border-crossing system that recognizes travelers based on the characteristics of their iris. SIMPLE can be used alone or with the company's FAST system, which scans passports and checks them for authenticity.

“People are coming here showing their interests — not only their technology interests but also their business interests,” Otto said.

“That is a clear indication that the concept of West Virginia toward this very, very important new technology of biometrics is correct.”

Story created Wednesday, June 16, 2004.