



Alabama Launchpad in final countdown to aid 2011 entrepreneurs

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By

MOBILE, Ala. -- Relatively few people know about the competition that will act itself out Friday at the University of South Alabama.

But if Alabama is to rebuild its economy by growing small businesses, as Gov. Robert Bentley has emphasized, the Launchpad finals should get more attention.



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Alabama Launchpad, a partnership among state universities and the Economic Development Partnership of Alabama, is an organized effort to commercialize the technology developed in Alabama research universities. It is part of the Launchpad mission to support "high-growth entrepreneurship" and innovation.

Launchpad's most visible program is a **statewide business plan competition**. This year's version culminates Friday with presentations at the USA Library Auditorium.

"It is really a lot of fun," said Reggie Taylor, associate director of USA's Office of Technology Transfer, who encouraged members of the business community to attend the event. Finalist teams will make 12-minute presentations of their business plan, then answer questions from judges. They compete for \$175,000 in seed capital.

Coastal Alabama has a team to root for -- Hurri-Pier & Dock Systems.

Michael Calhoun is chief executive officer of the company that developed and markets a "removable" pier held together by now-patented galvanized steel brackets that replace the wooden cross ties in traditional pier construction. When storms approach, the pier can be taken down, then later reassembled.

Interested in attending Friday's competition or getting involved with Launchpad? Call 251-460-6479 and ask for Taylor, or email reggietaylor@usouthal.edu.

"At first glance, it is not as high-tech as some," said Taylor. But the product is practical and scored well with judges, he said, because it meets an obvious need along the Gulf Coast and in similar areas.

Judges, Taylor said, have demonstrated a "real appreciation for inventions that are relatively far along in their development stage" and can make good use of the seed money provided by the program.

"That money can go a long way when you actually have someone who has a working prototype," he said.

Calhoun, whose team qualified for the competition because his wife works at USA, said the process has been helpful even if he doesn't win.

"For my company, it opened our eyes to a lot of things," said Calhoun. "You're required to do a market survey and market analysis. It really made you sit down and write a full business plan. ... It really makes you think long-term."

Calhoun said that his product, which he figures will cost at most 20 percent more than traditional construction, is already in place in three locations, and he's developing a network of certified installers. He hopes within five years to have the systems in place from Panama City west to the Louisiana line.

"I just appreciate the chance," he said recently. "I think Alabama Launchpad has done a great job for the state."

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