

# **A Chat about Innovation and the Region with Rob Wonderling, President and CEO, Greater Philadelphia Chamber of Commerce**

Tine Hansen-Turton and Nicholas Torres    07 May 2010

Rob Wonderling became President and CEO of the Greater Philadelphia Chamber of Commerce just shy of one year ago. The Chamber is a business advocacy organization of 5,000 member companies, including a growing nonprofit sector that promotes growth and economic development in the 11-county region and advocates for sound public policy while delivering strong member services and programs.

A former Pennsylvania State Senator, Rob arrived with an agenda to advance the region's businesses, particularly by strengthening the entrepreneurial and tech communities. His goals reflect his lifelong interest in innovation and economic expansion. During his seven years in the State Senate, Rob served as Chairman of the Transportation Committee and as a member of several other committees. He focused on promoting economic development and job creation, modernizing infrastructure, maintaining access to high-quality health care services,

helping young entrepreneurs and families prosper, reducing the tax burden, and creating a more livable region.

Rob is also on the governing board of Select Greater Philadelphia, the economic development/marketing affiliate of the Chamber. Through Select Greater Philadelphia and the Chamber Rob seeks to unite the wisdom of the private and nonprofit sectors in incubating new ideas to create the catalyst for change this region needs.

***Philadelphia Social Innovations Journal (PSIJ)***: Almost a year into your job as leader of the Greater Philadelphia business community, do you miss public office?

**Rob Wonderling (RW)**: I enjoyed my time in the State Senate and serving the public, and am pleased I am able to continue to do so through the Chamber. I'm especially enjoying public service without a ballot box....Just as in the Senate, I'm focused on improving our region, and working with our colleagues to create jobs and wealth in our communities.

**PSIJ**: What are your thoughts on social innovation?

**RW**: Benjamin Franklin may be our city's most famous social entrepreneur. He was more loved and famous than any celebrity throughout the world. But [Philadelphia's role in social innovation] started even before him in the political, civic and private sectors.

As an example, Philadelphia invented public health, improved transportation and distribution of goods, improved conditions on the battlefields, and the list can go on.

**PSIJ:** So what do you see as entrepreneurial growth trends for the region?

**RW:** I am very optimistic about the future of our region, which continues to see growth and adaptation of big pharma and the life science sector. And Philadelphia is still a prime shipping port and destination for transportation of goods. We've got three Class 1 railroads and an excellent port that positions us nicely – and we have little competition. Hospitality and tourism and the alternative energy sector are other growth areas.

**PSIJ:** What's your role in creating social innovations and supporting social entrepreneurship?

**RW:** My role as the leader of the Chamber is to be a civic matchmaker. When you are able to connect leaders and social entrepreneurs with each other, change can happen. . . . Today we are so busy using our electronic means to connect that we often forget the importance of "face-time" in making connections and social change happen. Technology is a tool to create partnerships, but we are still people who need to spend time together to build trust and understand

our respective motivations. . . . Creation of business partnerships and generation of new ideas and social innovations are best done when people can communicate with one another in person.