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EDITORIALS

Challenge(r) for Metroplex

Sputnik touched off the space race, which led to the moon shot, which led to Teflon. That, in a nutshell, is why the Metroplex board, when it meets in December, should vote to provide the necessary help to bring the Challenger Learning Center to downtown Schenectady. Like the space program itself, this venture promises excitement, educational opportunities and economic development.

The Challenger Learning Center is a national, nonprofit effort started by the families of the astronauts, including teacher-in-space Christa McAuliffe, killed in the explosion of the Challenger space shuttle in 1986. It caters to children in grades 5 through 8, who prepare for two months in class before coming to the center for a simulated space mission lasting three hours. The group is split up so that half the kids work in a Houston mission control replica and half in a space shuttle replica, complete with the sights and sounds of space flight. Then they switch. During their time they get to do routine tasks, take measurements, solve problems, and even experience emergencies that require teamwork and creativity to avoid disaster.

There are 54 centers already operating in the United States and Canada, all of them successful. The reason is that they have a built-in audience in the schoolchildren who attend. And such will be the case with this one, which will be operated and staffed by BOCES and will draw from a pool of 59,000 students (in the target age) over 14 counties. It's an excellent way to teach kids math and

science, and to inspire them to pursue these as careers.

That is why companies such as General Electric and Lockheed Martin have financially supported other Challenger Centers; why the new technology companies coming to the Capital Region can be expected to support it; and why the Schenectady community, with its many scientists and rich scientific history, can also be expected to.

Can be expected to, of course, is not the same as actually supporting. So the deal that the Metroplex board will consider is pretty risk-free: a line of credit of \$250,000, which Metroplex would recoup when a state grant already arranged by Sen. Hugh Farley is released, and a \$500,000 matching grant, given after the rest of the money has been raised. Provided it gets the federal money it feels confident of, the Challenger Center would have to raise \$1 million. That would be difficult but not impossible, even with Proctor's and the Schenectady Museum also involved in fund-raising campaigns.

This program would bring 12,000 students downtown each year and fit in nicely with other plans for the Proctor's block, including an IMAX-like theater and conference and meeting space. The Challenger people hope to also get corporations to use the program for team-building exercises, which could provide a real boost to the economy.

Another benefit would be the adaptive reuse of some hard-to-market space, the third floor of the former Carl Co. building. Metroplex should provide the boost this program needs for liftoff.
