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## Innovation the key word at business roundtable

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MALTA – A discussion among area business leaders Thursday centered around the importance of reinventing the wheel.

A business roundtable of the DeKalb County Economic Development Corp., with a theme of innovation and entrepreneurship, included representatives from two local manufacturing companies and a college dean of engineering. It was held Thursday afternoon at Kishwaukee College in Malta.

“I think innovation is here to stay, but I think an important aspect is that it be combined with entrepreneurship,” said Promod Vohra, dean of the College of Engineering and Engineering Technology at Northern Illinois University.

Dean Panettieri of Auto Meter Products Inc. and John Murphy of Tegrant Corp. and Alloyd Brands presented their companies’ approaches to creating new products and services.

In order to develop more than 200 new products a year, Sycamore-based Auto Meter has a five-step process that it adheres to called a stage-gate system. Each stage has a gate with “clearly defined specifications” that must be met in order for the product to move to the next stage, Panettieri said.

He said that each Friday the team has a meeting to go through what stage each product is in – from the concept stage to full-scale production – and whether it can move on to the next stage. This helps

balance the need for innovation with adhering to a schedule, he said.

Murphy, of Alloyd Brands and its parent company Tegrant Corp., both headquartered in DeKalb, presented the company’s five-year plan on innovation. Tegrant manufactures packaging products.

He said the plan began with workshops that involved about 70 employees, people with everyday interaction with the product line and with customers. The company also evaluated its competencies and reached out to customers for input, he said.

In the end, they narrowed the scope to five things to focus on, including sustainable initiatives like more environmentally friendly materials to use as packaging.

Vohra wrapped up the discussion with a look at what needs to be done locally and nationally to stay on top of competing innovators.

He said that the presentations by Panettieri and Murphy had many common threads – support, teams, planning, assessment, goals and implementation.

But the U.S. graduates just 57,000 engineering students a year, he said, while 900,000 graduate in China and India combined.

“There is a heightened need for American manufacturers to be competitive in this environment,” Vohra said.

Products need to be catered to global consumers, such as producing smaller cell phones for people in Asian countries – who often have smaller hands and where many women don’t carry big purses, he said.