

# RRPC demonstrates the power of 'co-opetition'

By **TOM BATTLEY, MIKE BECHTOLD, BOB BICKSLER**  
and **RICK PLYMPTON**

Many industries are coping with the effects of the struggling U.S. economy. Thankfully, the need for precision optics manufactured in the United States, especially in the Rochester area, shows that there is some light at the end of the tunnel.

The increase in demand for precision optics manufacturing among Rochester-area companies is resulting in more job opportunities for entry-level to experienced individuals interested in being a part of an industry with a positive outlook. Our firms are prime examples:

■ Rochester-based JML Optical Industries LLC, which specializes in designing and manufacturing precision optics for a wide range of global imaging applications, employs more than 80 people and is currently hiring.

■ Optimax Systems Inc. in Wayne County provides rapid prototyping of precision optical components in sizes up to 450mm. Optimax has added 30 employees in 2012 to increase its workforce to 200.

■ And OptiPro Systems LLC, across the street from Optimax, designs and builds state-of-the-art computer numerically controlled machines capable of manufacturing precision optics. OptiPro has more than doubled its workforce in the past three years—from 26 to 54 employees—and is continuing to hire qualified applicants.

JML Optical, Optimax and OptiPro are just three of the many local optics companies in the Rochester Regional Photonics Cluster that have seen significant growth over the past few years. The RRPC includes more than 60 leading optics, imaging and photonics companies, world-renowned university programs and research centers. Rochester optics companies develop innovative technologies and products at the forefront of industry applications and solutions. It is this profound experience that gives companies in Rochester a competitive edge in the optics arena.

Involvement in the RRPC is a definite advantage when potential customers are looking for quality precision optics. By choosing complementary services and working together to solve industry needs, Rochester optics manufacturers are demonstrating the power of "co-opetition."

JML Optical recently bought two machines from OptiPro to

expand its capabilities and increase capacity. Optimax purchased a machine from OptiPro as well, to accommodate an increase in demand for larger optics. OptiPro offers more than a dozen machines capable of grinding, polishing and providing final surface finishing and metrology of precision optics.

OptiPro's involvement in the RRPC, especially the company's relationships with local universities and institutions, is one of the catalysts behind the development of its popular line of advanced optical fabrication equipment. OptiPro hires talented engineers in optics and engineering programs at the University of Rochester, Rochester Institute of Technology and Monroe Community College as summer interns while they are still attending school. After these students have earned their degrees, they frequently are offered full-time jobs in their fields of expertise.

The uniqueness of the RRPC helps explain why companies across a wide spectrum of industries, as well as government agencies, continually reach out to Rochester-area optics companies for solutions to their technological challenges.

With their history of innovation and collaboration in optics, photonics and imaging, RRPC member companies feel that it is incumbent upon them to help other members, even competitors. Co-opetition, when companies act out of shared interests to work with competitors, while still striving to achieve competitive advantage, is one of the hallmarks of cluster work.

Another example of cluster advantage is the proximity of capital equipment manufacturers, like OptiPro, and manufacturers that need advanced technology for competitive advantage, like JML Optical and Optimax. Any company that wants to achieve a competitive advantage in optics would benefit from being in Rochester and participating in the cluster.

In 2010, the cluster accounted for more than \$5 billion in manufacturing output from the Rochester region. That was about 50 percent of the regional total and nearly 10 percent of the total for the entire state of New York.

With cluster members constantly striving for new and exciting technological advances, their role in the economy is likely to grow.

*This article was written by Tom Battley, executive director of the Rochester Regional Photonics Cluster; Mike Bechtold, president of OptiPro Systems LLC; Bob Bicksler, CEO of JML Optical Industries LLC; and Rick Plympton, CEO of Optimax Systems Inc.*