

Energy Capital hopes to build research facility

UW partners with local development group

By [JONATHAN GALLARDO](mailto:jgallardo@gillettenewsrecord.net) News Record Writer jgallardo@gillettenewsrecord.net

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A carbon innovation research facility may be coming to Campbell County.

Phil Christopherson, CEO of Energy Capital Economic Development, said his organization hopes to build an advanced carbon products innovation center next to Atlas Carbon at the former Fort Union mine site.

He told Campbell County commissioners Thursday that it will be a “research and study facility where people can come out and set up pilot projects so they can take our most abundant resource, coal, and see what they can do with it.”

Christopherson said there are “all sorts of things that you can do with coal that are incredibly valuable and add a lot of value,” and that the University of Wyoming is interested. However, “One of the things the university is missing is a place to do some of this research.”

The university’s School of Energy Resources is working with Energy Capital on the project with advice and building design. Christopherson said he hopes to continue the partnership.

“In the long run, we hope they’ll be tenants of the facility,” he said.

Christopherson said he's been talking with Richard Horner, the deputy director of emerging projects and technology at UW.

"He's pretty excited about it," Christopherson said. "He's got a list of people who he thinks will be ready to occupy it. He is committing to put some people and projects up here."

Christopherson said coal has so much more to offer than power, and he commended both Atlas Carbon and REX Carbon for doing activated carbon in Campbell County.

"They add tremendous value to that coal, which is good," he said. "But we need more of those types of things to use more coal so that coal companies have alternate markets to provide that coal to."

Christopherson said being located next to Atlas Carbon will be a huge benefit.

"They have all the coal-handling facilities and an inventory of coal that researchers can easily access," he said.

Christopherson said he doesn't expect the project to yield immediate results.

"I don't expect to see any businesses come out of it next year or the year after," he said. "But 5, 10, 20 years from now, we may have a 50,000-square-foot research facility out there.

"This is a long-term type of thing, but with this we could really transform our own economy and really take it to the next level."

The plan is still in the early stages, and one very important thing still has to be accounted for: money.

Christopherson said he intends to apply for a \$1.5 million grant from the Wyoming Business Council. The money would pay for the land and to develop infrastructure at the site.

The grant requires a 10 percent match, Christopherson said, and Energy Capital is working with the owner of the land where the proposed facility will be.

“We’ll get the land appraised, and he has promised to discount the price of that property by a certain amount to hopefully come up with a match for the grant,” Christopherson said. “So that way, if things go well, we won’t have to use any cash from the county or anybody else. We just go in with the grant application and use the valuable land to match the grant.”

The grant application has to be submitted by Dec. 1. From there, it will go to the Wyoming Business Council board in March, then the Wyoming State Loan and Investment Board the next month.

“If everything goes well, we can have the funds in May or June of 2017,” Christopherson said. “And if it slides, we can resubmit.”

It’s no secret that Wyoming is in an economic downturn, so funding is not always going to be available. But Christopherson said he won’t stress out over something he has no control over.

“It is a concern, but I don’t lose sleep over it. This is part of the process,” he said. “And the state has their own funding priorities, so I don’t know where this would fit in that.”