

Carbon Innovation Center Moves Forward



(Gillette, Wyo.) It's a catch 22. The state has an abundance of a highly valuable mineral, coal, but it leaves the economy dependent on unpredictable and varying commodity prices.

Diversifying the economy means either starting a whole new industry from the ground up that is not dependent on the mountain of energy beneath the ground—a scenario unlikely to succeed—or developing more industries based on coal.

There's been a lot of talk about utilizing CO₂ to produce a variety of products, with projects such as the Integrated Test Center looking to utilize the gas and minimize its impacts.

But the push for economic diversity doesn't end there. Energy Capital Economic Development today discussed with the Campbell County Commission today plans for an Advanced Carbon Products Innovation Center.

Unlike the ITC, which researches what to do with the byproducts of burning coal, the advanced carbon facility looks at other products to create with coal.

“Anything you make with oil you can make with coal,” said Phil Christopherson, CEO of Energy Capital Economic Development.

The problem is making these products commercially viable.

“Making something on a lab bench is very different than making a commercial plant...There’s no path from the laptop to the commercial plant,” Christopherson explained.

That’s where the center will come into play.

The Wyoming Business Council has granted Energy Capital \$1.5 million to get the facility up and running, and the owner of the property where the facility is to be built northeast of Gillette is matching the grant with another \$160,000 in funding, which will go toward the purchase of the land.

The total land costs are about \$500,000. Architecture and engineering fees are about \$77,000, and the rest of the \$1.5 million will go towards construction costs.

As a former coal mine, the 9.5-acre location was chosen due to the accessibility of coal and coal processing facilities.

Christopherson was before the commission to get approval to receive the grant, which goes to Energy City through the county.

Christopherson said it may take some time before the center starts producing new businesses based on advanced carbon products. He pointed to Atlas Carbon, which began with an idea on a laptop and later became a pilot project in Utah. Finally, they set up a production facility in Campbell County. The whole process took about 15 years.

“These things don’t just happen. It’s quite a process,” Christopherson said.

The role of Energy City Capital Development in this process, Christopherson explained to the commissioners, is to facilitate the many pieces that come together to make such a project come to fruition.

The project will create 10 to 20 direct jobs during the next five years. Once the facility is built, they will begin leasing lab space to tenants. Christopherson said they have one company currently on board, but due to confidentiality requirements the company could not be named.

It could be several years before any tenants’ research begin producing pilot projects and even longer before commercial plant locations spring up.

If successful, the facility would be the seeds for hundreds of jobs based upon the state’s most abundant minerals.

The commission approved the request to accept the funding. There’s still a few more steps before they break ground on the facility. The project must go through the subdivision process. The building needs to go through the design phase, and a contractor will need to be selected through a bidding process.

Speaking after the meeting, Christopherson said they hope to break ground by May or June 2018. However, with the funding in place, the facility is sure to come to fruition.

“We’re excited to get this off the ground and going,” Christopherson said.