

Falling into place

Local economic development group looks to double up on carbon facility with another \$1.5M grant

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- Jul 2, 2017



The Atlas Carbon production plant stands on the grounds of the former Fort Union coal mine and is near the site of a future carbon products research facility that recently was funded by a \$1.5 million state grant.

For Phil Christopherson, CEO of Energy Capital Economic Development, it seems like everything is falling into place for a proposed carbon research facility.

Last month, the Wyoming State Loan and Investment Board approved a \$1.5 million grant for the Advanced Carbon Products Innovation Center, a 5,000-square-foot facility

at the former Fort Union mine site that would give researchers a space to see what they can do with coal.

Christopherson said that his organization had two options after getting the grant. It could either move forward with the project, or apply for another grant from the Economic Development Association.

Christopherson decided to go with the latter, and on Friday submitted a grant application to the Economic Development Administration for another \$1.5 million.

He said Kirk Keysor, the regional EDA representative for Montana and Wyoming, told him he thought ECED has a good chance of getting the grant.

“We fit all the criteria,” Christopherson said. “We’re a coal-impacted community, this project directly addresses bringing more jobs to the area and we’re using our existing natural resources to help add value to them.”

The grant, which is part of the EDA’s Assistance to Coal Communities program, requires a 50 percent match in hand, which the organization has. If approved, ECED will have \$3 million to work with.

“We’re first in line. All in all, we’ve got a pretty good shot at it,” he said. “What we intend to do with that additional \$1.5 million is get the equipment we need to bring it up to a full, ready-to-go facility.”

The equipment would be general items that researchers would need for activities such as handling and processing coal and controlling emissions.

But if the organization doesn’t get the grant, then the project will continue as planned before. It’s a win-win situation, Christopherson said. It’s just that one win would be larger than the other.

He said he expects to know in September or October if ECED gets the grant.

“But you never know with these things,” he said. “If they get a lot of people it might take longer.”

Christopherson said that there usually are hurdles to overcome in the application process, but Christopherson got this done in a couple of weeks.

“I’ve never had an application come together so quickly and everything just fall into place,” he said.

The program opened up the day after the State Lands and Investment Board approved the first \$1.5 million, and the grant application was written in the two weeks that followed.

A year ago, the Campbell County Commissioners gave ECED \$15,000 to write the grant application to the Wyoming Business Council for the carbon research facility. It only used about \$12,000, and the rest of that was used to write the application for the EDA grant.

“Thank you to whoever had the foresight to put \$15,000 in that money you gave us for this project, because that perfectly filled what we needed,” Christopherson told commissioners last week.

That Atlas Carbon already is operating near the site and has developed a value-added use for Powder River Basin coal — turning it into activated carbon for filters — is a huge advantage in attracting similar-minded businesses, Christopherson said.

“That is tremendously helpful. Atlas Carbon is a revolutionary business in Campbell County,” he said prior to the SLIB approval. “It’s an example of exactly what we want to have happen throughout our region.”

There are still a few things that still have to be completed with the research facility. A grant agreement that outlines the conditions has to be drawn up, and the property remains to be purchased.

“We’re not going to buy that property until it is a platted lot,” Christopherson said.

The property’s owner is working with the county to get it platted as an industrial park, as opposed to its current zoning as a retired mine site, which places it under state control.

“The DEQ had wanted to basically tear down all the facilities, pull out the rail, let it set for 10 years, and then let them put all that stuff back in,” he said.

Once it’s replatted, the area will be under county control instead of DEQ’s control.

Another thing the organization is looking for is a better nickname for the Advanced Carbon Products Innovation Center. Right now it’s “Ice Pick” because it looks similar to the abbreviation, ACPIC. Christopherson said the moniker is not set in stone.

“We’re still looking for a better name,” he said.

Not just coal

Although the “Ice Pick” is focused on carbon research, Christopherson hasn’t forgotten about other industries.

Since October, he has had 134 leads from businesses, ranging from “cool,” meaning minimal interest, to “hot,” meaning there are ongoing conversations about coming to Campbell County.

There are 15 hot leads, none of which have yet led to a site visit, but Christopherson said he’s close on three of them. Most are manufacturing companies, he said, a result of his traveling around the country attending trade shows and making contacts.

And locally, Christopherson hopes to move forward with the Energy Capital Enterprise Center on Sinclair Street. It's been around for a while and was started to serve as an incubator space for entrepreneurs. There are four tenants in the building now, two of which moved in last month.

The one thing it's missing is a director, someone who can guide current tenants and identify new ones. Christopherson said he'd like to hire one, but the money isn't there. He hopes that once the building fills up, there will be enough revenue to hire a full-time director.

Until then, ECED's looking for a volunteer, preferably a retired business executive who still wants to help businesses and is willing to put in 10-15 hours a week.

It's no secret that starting a business from scratch can be very difficult. Entrepreneurs might know their product or industry very well, but they might not be as knowledgeable about management, accounting, human resources and other elements of running a business.

"A good group working with them could help them overcome that, which would increase their chance of success," Christopherson said.

He said he also hopes to establish a maker space, with "a couple of 3-D printers, maybe some small lathes so people can come in and do some prototype work."

For those interested in either volunteering as director or renting out an office space in the Energy Capital Enterprise Center, call Energy Capital Economic Development at 307-686-2603.