

County talks ITC, XPrize and the economy

Commissioners favor forming working group to take advantage of local carbon research

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Campbell County commissioners may form a working group to examine economic development opportunities with the Integrated Test Center and the NRG COSIA Carbon XPrize research competition.

The idea came out of the daylong planning session commissioners had this week in Wright as they covered 14 wide-ranging issues.

During the session, commissioners expressed doubts about the future of a county that's tied solely to the coal or energy industries.

"Some people are content just watching a community dissolve. I'm not willing to do that," said Commission Chairman Mark Christensen.

Commissioner Clark Kissack spoke about the "slow death" of the area.

The solution, Christensen said, may be in the opportunity for economic development presented by the ITC and the teams of researchers working on carbon projects there as part of the XPrize.

"I don't want to miss out on that, but it takes (economic development) to a whole new level," he said.

Carbon research

“You have to address the carbon. It’s now tied to the life of the big plants,” Christensen said. “We need to focus on activated carbon. ... Focus on the research. I think we have an opportunity, but we really have a short fuse.”

Five teams of researchers will work out of the ITC and stay in the Gillette area for about two years, the commissioners said. In that time, conversations should take place about keeping some of those teams in the county and what it would take for them to do so, Christensen said.

“If we want to capitalize on the opportunity, you have to focus on bringing them here because we’ve chased a lot of frogs (in the past),” he said, referring to some failed projects. “We have to do something to bring the expertise here.”

“None of this is in place,” said Commissioner Micky Shober. “If we don’t get our property zoned and developed, our opportunity will be passed. ... There is a requirement that you have to have a site ready. We’re a victim of our own process. We have to have a plan and do it as we can afford it. ... Let’s start it now.”

Not a destination

The problem, Kissack said, is that “Gillette is not a destination and I don’t think we can ever make it a destination.”

And a community tied mostly to the future of coal may not fare well in the future.

“Those days are coming. I see them coming and I don’t know what to do,” Kissack said. “Just as soon as there is a downturn in our economy, there’s 2,500 people who leave here to go find jobs.”

“We’re in the fourth quarter,” added Commissioner Rusty Bell. “I believe that Clark said it, it will be a slow death. Coal companies, if they want to sell their product, they have to adapt.”

The county also has to adapt, Shober said.

He pointed out that when Weatherby moved its gun manufacturing business to Sheridan recently, that community had land developed and a business park ready for Weatherby's 100,000-square-foot facility to be built. The former California company plans to begin manufacturing in Sheridan next spring, providing more than \$5 million and 70 to 90 jobs annually.

Gillette, he said, needs to do the same thing and think of it as an investment in its future.

"It isn't a process that takes (place)overnight, but we need to start," he said.

A lot of times, economic development is high risk, Shober said. But as a government entity, "you protect your risk."

If the commissioners don't try, "we will at least some point down the line wish that we did," he said. "But if we don't have a board (economic development) that's behind this, it's kind of like going to the bathroom in the wind."

Working group

Christensen said the working group could focus on contacting those research companies, discussing what would be needed and working smarter on economic development.

He suggested several people who could serve on the group, including those from the Gillette area, the University of Wyoming and the state.

The economic development group now formed in Campbell County does a good job at traditional recruiting, he said. "But we need a different group of people. We need to do it now. There's some people and some talents. We need to do it."