

Carbon facility closer to construction

Advanced Carbon Products Innovation Center will get \$1.5M grant when it buys property

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A year after Energy Capital Economic Development announced plans to bring a carbon innovation research facility to Campbell County, many of the big hurdles have been cleared, but there are a few more steps before construction can begin.

Earlier this year, the State Loan and Investment Board approved a Business Ready Community Grant of \$1.5 million for the Advanced Carbon Products Innovation Center, which will be built at the former Fort Union mine site.

The Wyoming Business Council won't distribute the money until the purchase of the land is complete, and that can't be finalized until the subdivision is platted.

Phil Christopherson, CEO of Energy Capital Economic Development, said he expects the platting to be complete at about the end of November, and he hopes to buy the land at the end of December or the beginning of January.

This will be followed by conceptual and final designs, and he wants to put bids out for construction of the building in February or March.

He's putting together an involvement team to help design the facility, and it includes a representative from the University of Wyoming School of Energy Resources, Jim Ford of Atlas Carbon and Dave Spencer of the Advanced Carbon Collaborative.

Even though it hasn't reached the design stages yet, the project has already generated interest, with one business writing a letter to Christopherson expressing its intention to be the facility's first tenant.

While the Integrated Test Center being built at the Dry Fork Station power plant is focused on carbon dioxide research, which Christopherson called "the back end of burning coal," this new facility will focus on the front end, trying to find things to do with coal without having to burn it.

Christopherson's hope is that this facility will become a host for pilot plants where researchers can work on their ideas to see if they're commercially viable.

"There's a lot of lab research that's been conducted that shows you can make coal into thousands of different products, but very little of that lab research has transitioned to the commercial market," Christopherson said. "If you don't do that intermediate step (pilot plants), it never comes to be."

The long-term goal is that some of these tenants will eventually build manufacturing plants in Campbell County. Christopherson used Atlas Carbon as an example. The company found a new way to make activated carbon and tested it in a pilot plant in Utah for almost 10 years. After proving its product was commercially viable, Atlas Carbon wanted to be close to its raw material — coal from the Powder River Basin — so it built a commercial plant in Campbell County.

If those coal researchers follow in Atlas Carbon's footsteps and decide to manufacture here, it will secure "our coal jobs so that coal is continually mined here for a long time, regardless of what the thermal market does," Christopherson said.

"We really need to take charge and try to diversify our economy," he said. "We can't just let it happen. If we do that, we don't know what we're going to get."