

Plan released for attracting new business to northeast Wyoming

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Wyoming Secretary of State Ed Murray speaks during the Northeast Wyoming Economic Summit Friday at Sheridan College. Justin Sheely | The Sheridan Press

SHERIDAN — Business representatives from Sheridan, Johnson and Campbell counties have a plan to inject new life into the region's faltering economy.

The Northeast Wyoming Growth Alliance will have an office in Buffalo but will rely on a network of individuals and companies in Sheridan, Gillette and the neighboring areas to promote existing companies and attract new ones. The group received a \$100,000 planning grant from

the Wyoming Business Council in 2015 to support the efforts.

The regional marketing plan, announced Friday at an economic summit at Sheridan College, is the result of at least two year's of coordination by the three cities. In part, the plan is a response to the risks of an economy based too heavily on the volatile energy sector.

The talks began informally with the three cities' mayors in 2014.

"And even that point in time, people could see that with the prices of energy — both coal, the price of coal dropping, with the price of oil and gas dropping — could see that we were heading into a time where we were going to start to experience some negative economic impacts because of that," said Robert Briggs, planning and economic development director for the city of Sheridan.

Just since April 1, 465 workers in Wyoming's coal mining industry have been laid off. And with declining stock prices for coal companies in the Powder River Basin, combined with the fact that Wyoming faces one of the steeper uphill battles among states to reduce carbon emissions under the Clean Power Plan, proponents of the plan say it is time to look beyond energy production to fuel the region's economy.

The plan zeroes in on five sectors to promote: manufacturing, advanced conversion technology, data centers, logistics and distribution (including the area's railways and highways) and "lifestyle entrepreneurs."

The plan marks a new approach to attracting business. Briggs said that since all of the cities involved in the plan have fewer than 50,000 residents, it has been difficult in the past to attract new business.

But by banding together and promoting the three cities as a regional center, Briggs said, the area might be more attractive to outside companies. Many workers in urban areas commute up to an hour to work, Briggs noted, making the distances between Gillette, Sheridan and Buffalo seem more reasonable in comparison.

Briggs noted the plan marks a shift, too, in the relationship between the three cities.

"There are a lot of people that are looking and seeing if Sheridan and Gillette and Buffalo can set aside historic rivalries," he said.

A website for the Northeast Wyoming Growth Alliance, which has not yet gone live, gives a better look into how the group hopes to accomplish its goals for economic growth. The site touts the area's quality of life, access to outdoor recreation, K-12 schools and the Northern Wyoming Community College District, as well as Wyoming's business-friendly tax climate and skilled workforce.

One page on the site showcases available commercial real estate and another lists an "incentives directory" of grants and loans available to businesses in the area.

Briggs said next steps include educating the public and other interested parties about the plan, and securing more funding for marketing. For this, he said, the group would look to the Sheridan, Buffalo and Gillette city budgets.

Proponents of the plan are hoping the model can be adopted by other multi-county regions in Wyoming. The state is sometimes limited in its ability to promote economic development and must market the state as a whole, rather than focusing on certain regions. But this plan allows three communities to do just that.

"It brings together enough land area, enough population, enough assets that it becomes feasible to talk about a region of Wyoming," Briggs said.