

Diversifying bit by bit

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When Campbell County commissioners talked a few months ago about their hopes of building an industrial park east of Cam-plex with a price tag of about \$6.5 million, they were criticized for their grandiose plans, especially as the county faced uncertainty about future tax collections.

The critics are short-sighted, because it is just that type of investment that needs to be made in times like these if Campbell County is ever going to succeed in its long-stated goal of economic development.

In economic downturns like Campbell County is seeing, when unemployment hits an unheard of 7.1 percent here, people wring their hands over the community's and the state's huge reliance on the mineral industry. They wonder, where is our economic diversity?

Our economic development depends on taking risks in times like these to create areas where potential industries can move to.

There is a reason that Cheyenne has successfully attracted a variety of businesses and industries, and it isn't just because of its location where interstates and railroads meet. It is because a group of community leaders years ago invested in land and infrastructure so that businesses looking to relocate didn't have to wait for things like roads, water, sewer and power lines to be built — especially at their expense.

Three years ago, the county bought about 250 acres of land east of Cam-plex from Wyodak Resources for that purpose.

Last week, commissioners announced a deal with a Dayton, Ohio, company that hopes to build an activated charcoal plant there. They'll pay the county \$200,000 for 50 acres of land.

The deal hinges on a \$4.5 million grant from the Wyoming Business Council that would build the infrastructure the industrial park needs to get started. Officials say they're confident the grant will come through because it is just the type of project the council supports.

The grants need a 15 percent match, but the value of the land and other in-kind contributions can be used, leaving very little out-of-pocket costs for the county.

In all, it amounts to a win-win situation for Campbell County. It diversifies slightly as it invests for the future.

Any business that the industrial park attracts will never be able to replace the mineral industry in jobs and taxes. But every little bit helps.

It creates the opportunity for REX Carbon to build here. It creates the opportunity for the next one, and the next one after that.

That's much-needed economic development, one step at a time.