

Strong workforce could attract new industry to Gillette

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A year of energy industry layoffs in Gillette and Campbell County certainly have been a painful time for the community. That area coal mines have cut more than 500 jobs since the beginning of the year is evidence the local economy continues to trend downward.

While stressful for those looking for jobs and the community at large, Gillette's rising unemployment could also be used to help re-imagine the local economy. Energy Capital Economic Development CEO Phil Christopherson said it can actually be helpful in attracting industry to Gillette.

With hundreds of skilled workers now looking for jobs, larger companies looking to relocate could be lured by a city that already has a highly trained workforce ready to get on the job, Christopherson said.

"It helps a lot with all of our skilled workers in our recruiting effort," Christopherson said. "Every community in the world is trying to recruit the same businesses. But we are in a much better position with our workforce in attracting the businesses. There's a strong work ethic here and we're not giving up. We have the resources to get done what we need to."

One of the new projects that has been in the works for several years is kicking off Friday in Sheridan, he said. The NEW Growth Alliance, also called the Tri-cities Effort, will put the area of northeast Wyoming on the map for businesses looking to expand their operations.

Christopherson said large businesses won't even look at a community that has a population of less than 50,000 people. Campbell County only has 47,000. But with the NEW Growth Alliance and combining the areas of Sheridan and Buffalo, it suddenly has a population of 103,000.

"We are now on their map for locating their businesses," Christopherson said at the ECEDC's annual event on Thursday at the Gillette College Technical Education Center. "That partnership is critical."

A total of 465 people at the North Antelope Rochelle mine and the Black Thunder mine were laid off last Thursday and Friday. In early March, Buckskin mine laid off 38 people, while the Rawhide and Caballo mines also eliminated some jobs.

But Christopherson said the news hasn't been all bad. There are some projects and some efforts in the works in Campbell County. Some of those, along with the NEW Growth Alliance, include:

The Integrated Testing Center: Will host research on how to capture and repurpose carbon dioxide

emissions from coal-fired power plants.

Value-added production: Allows coal companies to produce more coal and carbon at a more cost-effective rate.

Campbell County: The community itself and its people are attractive to outside businesses.

Christopherson said he was graduating from college in the 1980s when Wyoming and Gillette went through a bust. He said out of that bust came the city as it is today with a state-of-the-art hospital, Gillette College, diverse retail sector and growth of the local businesses. He said the same thing can spring from the current downturn.

“We have gone through a little bit of a setback and it may get worse before it gets better,” Christopherson said. “But out of adversity and bad times come good times and we will be the better for it.”