

Atlas Carbon exec passionate, optimistic for economic future

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- Apr 7, 2017

When it comes to busting Campbell County's cycle of boom and bust, prioritizing building a diverse, robust economy needs to happen as much during the good times as bad.

Jim Ford, Atlas Carbon vice president who proudly proclaims himself "a local kid" from Gillette, told a packed Pronghorn Center on Thursday night that economic development can't follow the same roller coaster cycle Wyoming's become accustomed to riding by being overly dependent on oil, natural gas and coal.

"Does it happen to us, or because of us?" he asked about that economic dependence on energy. "Is the bust the norm and boom the exception? Maybe."

But it doesn't have to be, he said.

"Economic development is in the little decisions we make every day," he said, adding that the Powder River Basin is poised to "take charge of the future" if its business leaders will "use these lessons (of the coal bust) to improve where we're at today."

Ford joined University of Wyoming president Laurie Nichols as keynote speakers for the Energy Capital Economic Development Corp.'s annual meeting. His passion for Gillette and its economic future was punctuated by his message that progress doesn't just happen, it takes consistent work.

When times are booming, it's easy to just sit back and enjoy the ride and do nothing, Ford said. The money is flowing, business is good, so don't rock the boat.

While an easy attitude to adopt, the PRB needs to break that habit as it emerges from its most recent prolonged bust, which has gripped the area's oil, gas and coal industries at the same time.

"I've been in the world enough to know this is where I want to be," he said, adding he wants to make the economy stronger and more diverse so "my kids can make a choice to stay in Wyoming."

A major component in making that happen is refocusing higher education in the state, Nichols said.

The UW president has been at her post for about 11 months. She said she has quickly learned how important Gillette and the Powder River Basin are to both the state and its education system.

"Gillette is where I started," she said, referring to her first official function as UW president, which was giving a commencement speech at Gillette College. She also echoed Ford's message of being proactive and not "waiting for things to take care of themselves."

At UW, Nichols said the college can do that by focusing its research and education paths to make the university system an economic driver for the state.

"We are playing a little on the defensive right now," she said, adding that UW needs to offer academic programs that will push the economy forward. "We're committed to working alongside industry.

"We know the market (for coal) has slowed and coal is challenged. But it's not all gloom and doom."

She outlined four areas of focus where UW can make a difference, including:

- Invest in programs that maximizes coal.
- Protect existing markets while advancing technology like carbon capture.
- Create new markets for energy and mineral resources.
- Educating the workforce to succeed in a more diverse future economy.

Thursday's annual ECED meeting was a precursor to Friday's daylong Advanced Carbon Products Conference sponsored by the NEW Growth Alliance.

The conference features presentations from industry and academia with a focus on how to use Wyoming's most abundant resource — coal — to produce other products. Now, a majority of Powder River Basin coal is burned to produce electricity. Gov. Matt Mead and industry officials have said that finding non-Btu uses for coal is key to building and stabilizing Wyoming's economy.