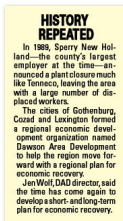


DAD goes for recovery grant

Written by Elizabeth Barrett

Thursday, 18 February 2010 04:11 - Last Updated Friday, 19 February 2010 20:31



Funds would help retrain workers, attract new industry

The closing of Tenneco is not only affecting Cozad but the rest of the county as well.

For that reason, Dawson Area Development has applied for a \$48,000 economic recovery grant that will pay for:

Research relevant to the rapid re-employment of displaced workers.

Development of an action plan to retain existing businesses, attract new business and industry and re-train available workforce for re-employment in the area.

Participation needed

Jen Wolf, DAD director, said everyone needs to participate in the process of providing information and input about these things.

“This really is a regional recovery plan because what is happening in Cozad will affect us all,” Wolf said.

Tenneco announced in September of 2009 that the automotive shock-absorber manufacturer would close at the end of 2010 because of a drop in demand for its products.

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Last December, 26 employees transferred to a Tenneco plant in Paragould, AK, and 16 chose not to move.

Wolf said about 75 employees will lose their jobs at the Cozad plant in March with 150 or more in April.

Parker Tech Seal of Gothenburg, Nebraska Plastics of Cozad and Orthman Manufacturing in Lexington also laid off employees in 2009.



Other businesses that have closed in the past year include Tabora Farms Bakery, Boerkircher's Carpet One, Stevlon's Gastro, Village Apothecary and Dairy Queen in Cozad; Hometown Variety Store, Radio Shack and the Welcome Mat in Gothenburg; and the Majestic Theatre and True Value Hardware in Lexington.

More layoffs coming

"With more upcoming layoffs at Tenneco, we're starting to see more impact than we have previously," she said.

As a result, DAD—with help from its board, Tenneco and others—decided to apply for Greater Nebraska Workforce Investment Act funds.

If awarded the grant, DAD will hire a consultant to look at the historic and current county economy and also get feedback from local employers and others.

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“We’ll look at the drawbacks and the good things and compare it to other regions this size,” Wolf explained. “We’ll also look at similar-sized regions and what they did to attract new growth.”

A second component deals with the evaluation of educational and training resources and the labor market in the area and a look at existing and potential sites and buildings for new business and industries.

The strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats to communities and the region will also be studied, Wolf said.

“We need to assess these and find the most logical targets (business and industry) so we’re not spinning our wheels,” she said.

Identification of potential industries for growth and required resources for that growth will be targeted.

Plan to attract industry

By working with professional site consultants, she said the county could attract an industry into the former Tenneco building, into other buildings or to other sites.

For example if they decide to attract a wind turbine blade manufacturer, she said the height of the ceiling in a building is a factor.

“They’ll give us an idea who’s expanding in regions of this size,” Wolf explained. “They’ll look at our access to the interstate, the railroad and our labor force and give us a list of industries we could go after.”

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Phase II of the grant, known as the action plan, identifies the steps needed to accomplish business retention and attraction and the retraining of displaced workers.

Once target industries are identified and the local workforce is assessed, Wolf said they may find workers need more computer training or skills specific to a certain type of manufacturing.

Because Dawson County is served by Central Community College, CCC can help make employees in the county more marketable.

“If we have the skills, we will be able to recover faster,” she explained.

However with CCC campuses only in Grand Island, Hastings and Columbus, Dawson County residents are at a disadvantage to take classes in terms of expense and time.

As a result, meeting with community college representatives to plan training courses in Dawson County is also part of the plan.

“Localized training will greatly increase the participation in skills and certificate programs,” Wolf said. “Localized training will also greatly reduce the cost to displaced workers by reducing travel requirements and the amount of time they are away from their homes.”

Location for classes

The county has a place to offer classes in the former Walmart building in Lexington which is now known as the Opportunity Center.

“We’re hoping the Opportunity Center fits into what we can offer,” Wolf said.

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DAD officials have applied for the grant. Wolf said she thinks they have a good chance of receiving it and she hopes to hear soon.

Research in Phase I of the plan could begin as early as next month with implementation of the action plan starting in July.

“Ideally, we’d like to see every family from Tenneco stay here and find new jobs,” Wolf said. “We have to do whatever we can to get someone to offer good-paying jobs to keep as many families here as we can.”

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