

## **Business park's progress: PEDA head considers the future**

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BerkshireEagle.com

PITTSFIELD -- The William Stanley Business Park of the Berkshires has been both the great hope and great enigma of economic development in Pittsfield since it was established 15 years ago. Progress has been slower than expected, development has moved at a snail's pace. Over the years, potential projects for the site have been announced with great fanfare, but only one building has ever been constructed.

Environmental remediation of the 52-acre site, a brownfield where the General Electric Co. once built power transformers, has been complicated and seemingly interminable.

The obstacles have been so daunting that the Pittsfield Economic Development Authority, the quasi-public agency charged with the park's development, didn't obtain ownership of all of the park's land from GE until exactly 12 months ago.

But through all the delays and disappointments, there has always remained hope. In the last year, PEDA has taken several steps that it hopes will position the park for a better future, although not all of them are visible yet.

PEDA's executive director, Corydon "Cory" Thurston, recently sat down with the Eagle to talk about recent developments, the agency's involvement with the life sciences, and how it eventually hopes that partnership will spawn a new industry in Berkshire County.

**Q:** People read more about PEDA now than they did before. But with a couple of exceptions, the site looks pretty much the way it did a few years ago. What would you say to people who wonder if there's been any progress?

**A:** "There's been a lot of progress, but unfortunately it's not the visual progress we're all hoping to see -- with one major exception. We constructed a 7,000-square-foot building [the MountainOne Financial Center] that's occupied by 27 people on the corner in less than a year. Once we get a tenant that has some interest we can get things done pretty quickly."

**Q:** Is PEDA's focus on the life sciences now?

**A:** "That's certainly a high priority, because I consider it probably having the greatest odds of success and greatest opportunity to construct a new building. But beyond the structure I am truly excited about the opportunity it creates for the market for economic development ... building a new industry, or growing a very fledgling industry in Berkshire County.

"What I mean about that is we have very few in the life sciences arena that are in the Berkshires. If we can do this the way we want to do this and create a lot of opportunities for start-up businesses in the life sciences with the help of the state, then we believe wholeheartedly that once they're here and throw down some roots, provided they have opportunities and can grow, then we'll keep them."

**Q:** In 2008, the state Legislature awarded the city of Pittsfield a \$6.5 million earmark to develop a life sciences facility at the William Stanley Business Park. For a variety of reasons - the economic recession, PEDA's decision to withdraw its proposal then resubmit it - the city has never received the funding. PEDA is now taking steps to receive that earmark, but instead of constructing an incubator building to support start-up life sciences companies, which was the original plan, Thurston said the focus now is on erecting a commercial and production facility for firms that are coming out of the start-up phase.

**A:** "We're not trying to get an incubator building. That's off the table. The research has shown there's enough incubators in the state. We want to be the next level, which there aren't a lot of.

"What we're targeting, and this project's vision, are companies that are just coming out of an incubator phase of their development. These are the kids, not necessarily fresh out of college, but the idea folks, they're in Cambridge,

around the educational institutions in Boston and Worcester, and sometimes Springfield, and they're growing their ideas.

"There will be a co-op facility where there will be a lot of shared resources. Its structure and business model is going to be very similar to what you'd find in an incubator, but it's the next step. These guys are going to come out here and actually build whatever it is they've designed. And we're going to help them grow their company to see if it can actually work from a commercial standpoint.

"Part of the research and part of what we've been doing lately is making sure we find our niche. That we model a plan that number one has the best odds of succeeding, and the best odds of being received by the state, and by being supported funding-wise. We still have to prove our case to get the money. The life sciences folks are doing a tremendous job in ensuring that as they try and grow the life sciences throughout Massachusetts that everything that is done is done in a complementary fashion.

"In Western Massachusetts, especially, we cannot afford to be in a competitive situation. We need to make sure that we fit a niche, that we are truly complementary to the ultimate goals."

Q: But can the life sciences really be a viable field in the Berkshires? Most of the life sciences activity in Massachusetts is located in the eastern part of the state.

A: "That's one of the reasons why we've got a hook here. When we look at Cambridge rents at \$300 and more a square foot, it makes the Berkshires at \$20 or \$25 a square foot a home run. "The real economic development takes place when we get some successful companies proving that their product works commercially and then we move them into their own space."

Q: Once these companies grow bigger, are you hoping that they'll remain in the park?

A: "Wherever. Who cares? In Berkshire County. It doesn't matter. The point is we're stimulating new businesses that are hopefully going to grow their business because their roots are going to be here. Once we start building something, and the cost factors are weighed into the margin, they're going to want to stay."

Q: Last year you said that manufacturing companies who want to come to the business park have to assume additional costs because they need to build their own facility, which means it would be less expensive for them to move to a structure that has already been built. Isn't that still an issue for companies who want to come here?

A: "I should step back. We're hoping to have a private piece of this. We're working with the private sector, so that we can build and add on to the state supported life sciences building for permanent options for people to move into. We're exploring that.

"Throughout Berkshire County there's lots of wonderful buildings that are available for rent or sale. That might also serve the need. The point is, let's get them here and get them started, and then there's lot of options, and lots of options to keeping them."

Q: When do you think PEDDA will receive the entire \$ 6.5 million earmark and construct a building?

A: "They're not going to drop \$6.5 million on us right away. To be perfectly honest that number came out in 2009 (actually 2008). I can tell you right out of the gate it's probably closer to \$10 million to build what we proposed to build back when the \$6.5 million was thrown around. Depending on how sophisticated a manufacturing space we build, it could be more than that. We could be asking for \$10 or \$15 million - I don't know.

"It's kind of walk before we run. In an ideal world it would probably be the end of 2014 that we could get in the ground in a perfect scenario."

Q: In December 2011, a Needham development company announced that it planned to build a shopping center that could bring 150 jobs to Pittsfield on a prime site at the William Stanley Business Park. Is that retail complex still in play?

A: "I have no idea exactly, other than there is no question that the developer is still interested in Pittsfield.

"Every now and then they call and we have a conversation. Whether that works or doesn't work it's kind of up to them to put the plan together. That's where the thing kind of fell apart the last time.

"It's still possible that a new proposal may surface."

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