

Councilors praise Berkshire Innovation Center plan, recommend \$250,000 for start-up

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PITTSFIELD -- The planned Berkshire Innovation Center won universal praise Tuesday before the City Council's Committee on Community and Economic Development, which unanimously recommended \$250,000 toward start-up costs for the facility.

Officials planning the 20,000-square-foot center, to be located at the William Stanley Business Park and constructed with a \$9.7 million state grant, said a project designer could be selected within a month and the facility is expected to open in 2016.

Mayor Daniel L. Bianchi has requested the start-up money from the Pittsfield Economic Development Fund, money set aside by GE as part of an environmental cleanup agreement for former company industrial property in the city.

Another \$250,000 is expected to be supplied for the center's start-up expenses over the next two years by the Pittsfield Economic Development Authority, which is overseeing development of the industrial park on former GE land off East Street.

Committee members, who voted to recommend approval by the full council in September, praised the center and its concept of providing high-tech research and development services and equipment and other assistance to local manufacturers to help them expand.

"This is an exciting opportunity, and I like that it will support businesses that are already here," said Churchill Cotton, the committee chairman.

"Without doubt, this is really something we should use [the development funds] for," said Council President Melissa Mazzeo, referring to stipulations that the GE money be used to create employment or boost the local economy.

Ward 5 Councilor Jonathan Lothrop praised the change of direction the project took after PEDA board members, the mayor, consultants and other planners decided against building a business incubator facility -- as once proposed as a use for the state grant funding -- in favor of what he termed "really a cooperative."

He and others said the innovation center takes better advantage of existing small manufacturing firms and should strengthen the Berkshire economy.

"It was a breath of fresh air when you changed direction," said Stephen Boyd of Boyd Technologies, chairman of the newly formed BIC board of directors. "That was a great first step in the success of this center."

According to project consultant Rod Jane of New England Expansion Strategies, the center would provide a state of the art video conferencing center to allow for training utilizing speakers or programs originating elsewhere; "clean-room" research and development areas and clean-room worker training spaces for advanced manufacturing processes; high-tech research and development equipment for product development and testing and for training workers, and educational services related to advanced manufacturing.

Jane said there are local firms and institutions from around the region interested in becoming members of

the Berkshire Innovation Center. Institutions such as Berkshire Community College, Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts and the University of Massachusetts would collaborate on programming and are among the organizations capable of securing additional grant funding that would benefit the center.

Officials said the facility is expected to be funded solely through membership fees and fees for training, research and other services.

Asked by Lothrop if further request for funding might be needed, officials said the business plan, described as conservative and sustainable, shows the center able to operate as a not-for-profit entity.

Douglas Clark, the city's director of Community Development, said the Massachusetts Life Sciences Center, which has approved the \$9.7 million grant for construction and equipment, was enthusiastic about the center's viability and increased the original grant of \$6.5 million for that reason.

The concept for an innovation center of this type, which would be the only one in the western part of the state, also was a factor in the grant increase, officials said.

Clark said requests for proposals were sought from design firms and proposals will be opened today. A team will review those and determine finalists, and local officials will work with state officials to select a project designer, likely to be under contract within a month.

Construction is scheduled to begin next year and be completed by July 2016.

Jane said start-up costs include hiring a staff, including a director and tech director; concluding contracts with the member firms and organizations, developing training and other programming, and selecting equipment to be installed and beginning to work with supplier firms that will provide program and facility services.

The first center board of directors meeting is set for Sept. 17.

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