

Henderson, Owensboro push regional project

By CHUCK STINNETT
, Gleaner staff
831-8343 * cstinnett@thegleaner.com
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The teaming up of the economic development organizations in Henderson and Owensboro to promote plant biotechnology and alternative energy projects is the latest effort at regional cooperation in northwest Kentucky, officials said Wednesday.

The newly announced Northwest Kentucky: A Center for Green Innovation is a joint project of the Henderson-based Northwest Kentucky Forward and the Greater Owensboro Economic Development Corp.

It will promote the region for producing medicine and other products from plants as well as to produce cleaner-burning fuel from coal and farm products.

"One hundred years ago, agriculture and coal was the basis of the economy of this region," Kevin Sheilley, president and CEO of Northwest Kentucky Forward, said at a news conference here Wednesday. "With technology, agriculture and coal can build a new economy here."

The formation of partnership "is not a merger of the two organizations," Sheilley said.

Northwest Kentucky Forward will continue to promote job growth in Henderson, Union, Webster and McLean counties, while the Owensboro organization will continue work there.

But it does represent the latest effort to bring Henderson and Owensboro together.

"Regional development is where it's at," Nick Brake, president of the Greater Owensboro Economic Development Corp., said.

"The economy doesn't know political boundaries or even geographic features" like the Green River between Henderson and Daviess counties, he said.

"Rarely are we really competing with Henderson" for new industries, Brake said. "We're competing with Shanghai and Dubai and Germany."

The first phase of the partnership, which will begin immediately, involves joint marketing of the region.

But longer term, the partnership will seek funding for workforce training, including science, engineering and mathematics. They also hope to obtain incentives and seed capital to encourage tech entrepreneurs.

The two organizations are trying to capitalize on new interest in this region.

Peabody Energy Corp. is considering locating a coal gasification plant in one of five western Kentucky counties and is studying a coal liquefaction plant near Sturgis, and an ethanol plant is being considered near Sebree.

To attract alternate energy projects, northwest Kentucky has 21.8 billion tons of coal reserves, more than half of the state's production of corn and soybeans and three interstate gas pipelines to help move products, Sheilley said.

It also offers the expertise of energy companies such as Big Rivers Electric Corp., Kenergy Corp., the new Patriot Coal Co., Texas Gas Transmission and others.

Owensboro is also participating in the alternative fuels industry with the recent opening of a plant at Owensboro Grain to turn soybeans into a form of diesel fuel called biodiesel.

But it also seeks to "literally create an entire industry of plant-oriented drug products out of Owensboro," Brake said.

"We aspire to be the world center for plant-based pharmaceuticals and plant biotechnology," he said.

Owensboro "has advantages no one in the world offers," principally the Kentucky Bioprocessing facility, which has the capability Brake said has the equipment and technical staff capable of developing commercial-scale production of plant-based drugs.

The facility is being used for cancer research and has attracted Mapp Pharmaceutical, a small San Diego-based company that will pursue plant-derived products there.