

Leaders hope city can be at the hub of sustainability

BY ADAM WALLWORTH

July 11, 2007 – Fayetteville, Arkansas

Climate protection could pay big dividends for Fayetteville if ideas become reality.

The recently created Applied Sustainability Center at the University of Arkansas, Wal-Mart Stores' interest in sustainability, a potential Sustainability Institute and \$ 100 million capital venture fund are the components that could lead to Fayetteville becoming a world leader.

“The ingredients are beginning to coalesce around ideas, capital and customers to drive that sustainability cluster here in Northwest Arkansas,” said Phil Stafford, president of the UA Technology Development Foundation.

Stafford said the idea of such an institute is still in the conceptual stage, but will hopefully one day drive the creation of a cluster of businesses developing sustainable technologies. While there are companies at the Arkansas Research and Technology Park that are either working on or are capable of working on such technologies, he said, it's too soon to call it an emerging cluster.

It's also too soon to offer any kind of time frame on when various aspects will role out, he said. The creation of the center, however, is the first step in getting the process started.

With the growing interest in sustainability, there will be rapid development in many areas, Stafford said, so the time to get moving is now. There is a very real possibility that Fayetteville can capitalize on the sustainable economy, he said.

“This is not pie in the sky,” Stafford said. “ We have enough elements that we can approach this as a viable initiative. ”

Funding for the center has not yet been worked out, but it will come from outside the university, said Jon Johnson, Applied Sustainability Center director and professor in the Sam M. Walton College of Business.

Johnson said an official announcement of the center will be released by the university in the near future, but he offered some of the plans for the center, which is hoped to ultimately be funded by an endowment.

The center will work with companies like Wal-Mart Stores that are interested in reducing carbon emissions at various stages of production and distribution, Johnson said. There are several levels of the process in which carbon dioxide is produced, he said, and the goal would be to find ways to release less carbon dioxide into the environment.

Where the center would be helping companies implement their sustainability plans, the institute

would be fostering the development of technologies that would be used by customers, said Steve Rust, president and CEO of the Fayetteville Economic Development Council.

Rust said the process, which he likened to the establishment of Silicone Valley, could take five to 25 years. There are already companies like BioBased Technologies developing green products, he said, and the key will be to build on those successes.

BioBased develops soybean-based polyols to make products, such as spray foam insulation, as an alternative to purely petroleum-based products. The goal of the company is to make such products completely soy-based.

The key to fostering new companies and attracting existing ones to the area is getting a venture capital fund up and running, Rust who has expressed a desire to start a \$ 100 million venture capital fund here, which could be moving in a year or so, he said.

Rust said that while the individual has been working in and out of Fayetteville for the last five years, he couldn't release his name. What needs to happen is to continue moving in this direction, he said.

“ There's a fork in the road in terms of, ‘ Do we want to take this path, or do we not want to take this path ?’” Rust said. “ I think Fayetteville and FEDC and everything I hear from the city and everything the university is doing — we're taking the sustainability path. ”

Rust said the initiatives launched by Mayor Dan Coody and the publicity it is producing are going a long way to help set the stage for the sustainability economy. He said that hosting the summer conference of the International Council for Local Environmental Initiatives goes a long way in helping gain momentum.

“All of that publicity and exposure highlights Fayetteville as the place to be if you want to be involved in this new business opportunity,” he said.

Coody said it is important to keep working so that “when people think of Northwest Arkansas, it's not a surprise to think of us being in the forefront of this movement.”

This is fertile ground, he said, and it is important to continue to work with the university and Wal-Mart.

“No one of us can do it very well ourselves,” he said. “ It will take all three to make this unfurl. ”

Coody said that this is a slow process that will take years, but every step is closer to achieving that goal.

“I think it's going to continue to grow in such a way that we will look up and realize we have become the center for startup business and new companies to move that can take advantage of the city and university and Wal-Mart, and take advantage of the quality of life and the fertile environment of the city, ” he said.

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