

Three vie for UW/GE plant

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Published: Sunday, February 22, 2009 12:27 AM MST

Campbell County has plenty of coal, but that might not be enough to nab a gasification plant other areas of Wyoming are vying for.

The county has the infrastructure and mineral development to handle the gasification test plant. But rivals Goshen and Laramie counties have their own list of reasons that make them good hosts sites. The three counties, narrowed from an original list of 15, are on the short list for a gasification plant that the University of Wyoming and General Electric will build to develop a gasification technology for Wyoming coal, according to a Friday press release.

After a year of negotiations the developers are ready to proceed with site selection and will start on-site investigations Saturday.

Campbell County Economic Development Corp. representatives said UW will contact the agency next week to schedule a site tour.

The economic development agency picked a site east of the city limits, said Mayor Duane Evenson. Exact details have not been released.

"I am delighted that Campbell County was selected as one of the finalists," he said. "Campbell County Economic Development Corp. did a great job. One of the things it gives us is now we'll get to see the selection process all the way till the end."

He expects to see some "political maneuvering" in the selection process. The test plant is expected to boost economic development for the community it ends up in. The cost of the project is between \$100 million and \$120 million and will be split by the developers.

The site should have a minimum elevation of 4,000 feet and should offer 35 acres to accommodate possible expansions, according to the list of criteria that the university released in January. The plant will burn 24 tons of coal a day when operating and will employ 15 skilled and semi-skilled workers on a continuous basis.

Here's a snapshot of each county, including what they have to offer and their need for economic development:

Goshen County

Why it's on the list: Because of its proximity to Nebraska, and the county boasts a work force that is cheaper to employ than workers in Campbell County. Half of the coal trains leaving Campbell County travel through Torrington, which means that the facility will have access to coal. But the county itself doesn't have any economically mineable coal, said Sen. Michael Von Flatern, R-Gillette.

As a small farming town, Torrington needs development, he said. The poorest county in the state, Goshen County's tax base in 2007 was about \$100 million. For comparisons, Campbell County's tax base in 2008 was about \$4.7 billion.

"It would be a bigger economic stimulus package for them," he said. "It will be a huge plum for them."

Its drawbacks: Despite the BNSF Railway line that runs through Torrington, the county doesn't have industrial infrastructure, said Rep. Tom Lubnau, R-Gillette. The county's only industrial asset is the ethanol plants owned by Wyoming Ethanol. Nor does the county have work force that has expertise in coal research or working with coal. The state medium-security prison under construction in Torrington will bring 200 new jobs when it's complete later this year and will become the county's second-largest employer after the farming industry.

"I can see the 'sharing the wealth attitude,'" Von Flatern said.

Laramie County

Why it's on the list: The county has two major interstates running through it. Its proximity to Denver International Airport would alleviate travel distance for researchers and scholars involved in the plant. The county neighbors with Albany County, home to the University of Wyoming and most of its research facilities. The county soon will have the \$60 million National Computer Atmospheric Research supercomputing data center and it might be an asset in coal research, which will involve worldwide recognized researchers. Plus, the county economic development agency is aggressive in developing the county and educating the work force, Lubnau said.

Its drawbacks: The county is a bit "overpopulated with state money," Von Flatern said. That shows in infrastructure and economic development that is going on in Cheyenne: a UW research facility on the Laramie County Community College campus, a Wal-Mart distribution center, progress with data storage centers and the research computer. With all these assets and businesses that are based around the state government, the gasification facility will have a minor impact on the economic development of the county and might be better suited for economic development purposes elsewhere, Von Flatern said. The county also has no mineable coal.

Campbell County

Why it's on the list: The county has the main resource for the plant" plenty of coal. Powder River Basin coal varies in its heating value from 8,100 British thermal units north of Gillette to 8,680 Btus south of town. Sulfur content varies, as well: from 0.5 percent in the north to 0.25 percent in the south. Researchers at the plant will be able to choose from coal of any heat value and of any sulfur content within hours, Von Flatern said.

The county also will make sure that Gillette College meets all the needs for the research, he added. With five power plants in the county, the gasification plant will have access to cheap power.

"Development of this kind of technology in this area where we already have five power plants makes sense," Lubnau said.

Its drawbacks: One of Gillette's disadvantages in the battle for the gasification plant will be its remoteness. Finding housing might not even be difficult if the plant will have only 15 full-time employees. But if the researchers travel to Gillette once or twice a week from Laramie, the four-hour travel distance from UW might be a drawback for Campbell County.