

'Green' project could bring jobs to Gaston

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A proposed "eco-friendly" industrial park has a Charlotte address, but with a location on the Catawba River opposite downtown Mount Holly, the benefits of a \$922 million investment and about 1,900 jobs could also flow through Gaston County.

As proposed, the ReVenture Park would include a broad mix of green technology and alternative energy projects — including a biomass power plant and a solar farm — developed to standards that would better protect the region's primary source of drinking water.

And the city of Mount Holly is also considering a partnership with Charlotte's municipal utilities to develop a \$197 million wastewater treatment plant on the site, which could incorporate green design and a process to transform biosolids into renewable energy.

All of that synergy in one location could make the ReVenture Park and the surrounding area a center for emerging energy and technology markets, said Donny Hicks, executive director of the Gaston County Economic Development Commission.

"You've got to hope that there will be some spin off (in Gaston County) either employment or related companies that need to be near" the ReVenture Park, Hicks said.

Gaston County is already competing for some complimentary projects. Hicks said the Gastonia Technology Park was recently one of three finalists nationwide for a \$100 million investment from a green technology company.

Redevelopment plans

At the ReVenture Park, Charlotte-based Forsite Development Inc. has outlined plans for a 49-megawatt biomass power plant, a 4-megawatt solar farm built on top of a closed gypsum landfill, a bio-fuels production facility, a transloading and ethanol mixing operation, a wastewater treatment plant and a facility that converts fleet vehicles to run on propane.

The master plan also includes a business park for “green” companies or non-profits, office space and a partnership with UNC Charlotte to develop a green technology research lab and business incubator. The developer estimates that the ReVenture Park on 667 acres off of N.C. 27 would create about 1,100 jobs and 800 temporary construction jobs with potential opportunities for the 13,000-plus workers currently unemployed in Gaston County.

Forsite Development Inc., which specializes in industrial redevelopment projects, has also completed two projects in Gastonia — redevelopment of the 165,000-square-foot CRS facility on Isley Drive and the 44,000-square-foot Norcap facility on Plastics Drive.

“We’re not developers. We’re redevelopers,” McKittrick said.

Contaminated site

The ReVenture location is a former chemical manufacturing facility owned by Clariant Corp. Because of prior contamination on the site, it is currently designated as a “Superfund” clean up site by the Environmental Protection Agency. Forsite has applied to have the property transitioned to a “Brownfield,” which would allow redevelopment and reuse of the site.

McKittrick said Forsite would continue to pump and treat ground water at the site. The company has proposed clean up measures beyond what is currently required, he said.

Plans also include a 40-acre park along the river and a 100-acre conservation easement and trail system along the Long Creek basin connecting the Carolina Thread Trail to the U.S. National Whitewater Center.

“Environmental sensitivity is a core facet of the project,” McKittrick said. “Everything that we’re proposing on the property is something that promotes a clean energy economy while protecting the environment.”

River District certification

The ReVenture Park is the first development along the river to volunteer for designation in the Catawba River District, which requires strict development standards to protect the watershed.

Catawba River Keeper David Merryman, who is also a board member with the Catawba River District, said he hasn’t seen all of the details yet, but the project “presents itself as a very responsible use of an old abandoned industrial site.”

“Any projects that go in there, I want to make sure they don’t impact the quality of those waters,” he said.

The proposed biomass power plant and wastewater treatment plant would require discharge permits from state and federal agencies.

Mount Holly’s wastewater treatment plants are nearing capacity. City leaders are still weighing options, including the proposed facility in the ReVenture Park, said assistant city manager Danny Jackson. The city could also direct some of its solid waste stream to the park for use in the biomass power plant, Jackson said, but that hasn’t been decided either.

Biomass power

Development of the proposed \$300 million biomass power plant could begin this year in an effort to capture \$60 million in federal tax credits. The biomass plant would burn wood, yard waste and garbage to turn steam turbines and generate electricity — enough to power about 50,000 homes, McKittrick said. That electricity could be sold to Duke Energy or provided to ReVenture tenants.

In addition to producing energy from materials that would otherwise rot in a landfill, McKittrick said the biomass plant would have the “highest emission control standards available in the industry.”

Meanwhile, developers are working with CoaLogix Inc., which already has a plant on the ReVenture site. Founded in late 2007, CoaLogix provides technology to maximize the removal of nitrogen oxide from power plant emissions. McKittrick said he’d like to see CoaLogix expand on the site. And if all goes as planned, several other innovative start-up companies will sprout up around CoaLogix, he said.

“That’s our hope — to create more CoaLogix-type companies,” McKittrick said. “The site has extensive infrastructure in place, making it perfectly suited for green energy and alternative fuels projects.”

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The Montcross Area Chamber of Commerce will host a community forum and lunch to discuss the proposed ReVenture Park and the Catawba River District March 25 at the East Campus of Gaston College in Belmont. Networking and a box lunch begin at 11:30 a.m. and the program starts at noon. Speakers will include Catawba River District President Bill Daleure, of Crosland LLC, and District Executive Committee members Rusty Rozzelle of Mecklenburg County Land Use and Environmental Services, and Edna Chirico of Chirico Huber Properties.

The cost is \$10 payable at the door. Registration is required online at www.MontcrossAreaChamber.com (Event Registration). For more information, call the Montcross Area Chamber at 704-825-5307.

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