



AEP offers help with Wildwood marketing

By Shannon Watkins

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A utility company and a consulting firm recently outlined how Wildwood Commerce Park can better qualify for prospective companies to locate there with site certification.

The utility company's site certification program could help the regional commerce park become more attractive to potential industries.

Site certification is the sometimes complicated process of helping companies decide where to build. According to the presentation Sept. 17 at the Crossroads Institute in Galax, the decision-making process can include everything from what basic utilities each site offers to their regional placement and available workforce.

The presentation was hosted by the Blue Ridge Crossroads Economic Development Authority (BRCEDA), which is developing the Wildwood site at Interstate 77's Exit 19 as a joint project of the City of Galax and Carroll and Grayson counties.

Consulting firm McCallum Sweeney and American Electric Power's Economic and Business Development Division have recently partnered to create the AEP Site Certification Program.

BRCEDA Chairman David Hutchins said Wildwood is 273 acres, 100 of them flat and 25 of them graded. It has fiber optics lines, an access road, water and sewer lines.

"We're marketing Wildwood Park as a well-prepared, well-positioned, industrial site for established companies seeking new locations to expand their operations," said Hutchins. "It was created to create new jobs and private investment to strengthen the regional economy."

The Virginia Tobacco Commission, the Virginia Department of Housing and Community Development, the Virginia Department of Transportation and other agencies have provided \$13.5 million in grants for Wildwood's development.

Hutchins announced that AEP had committed a resource of \$4 million to deliver electric distribution service to Wildwood.

"When a private utility company is willing to invest in an industrial development site such as Wildwood, it's clear that we have a viable, attractive site for large industry," said Hutchins. "AEP has also invited us to submit for site certification."

Getting Certified

AEP Key Accounts Manager Ray Kackley spoke about AEP's Quality Site Program. He said that many sites had submitted for program, with 11 accepted this past year.

Among the program's objectives are, "to identify and help communities prepare industrial sites for industries, and help the sites fit in with communities," Kackley said.

"Throughout this whole process, we will provide assessments of how it's going, and we and McCallum Sweeney can help you through this process to the end goal of getting that site ready," said Kackley.

Lindsey Myers, senior consultant for McCallum Sweeney, said her company's business is 70 percent site selection and 30 percent economic development. They engage in some strategic planning, she said, but mostly site certification.

The company has certified more than 80 sites, with 50 in the certification phase, and mostly works with three industries: manufacturing, offices and distribution centers.

Myers explained what companies want and what McCallum Sweeney looks for. "Being prepared gives a competitive edge," she said.

Manufacturing companies are mostly interested in a strong transportation and utilities infrastructure, having a good available workforce in the area and good access to customers and suppliers, Myers said.

Those looking for a new headquarters site, however, are usually either large companies looking for lower-cost areas for offices or small companies trying to find purchase in big cities that have access to better air service and a better office workforce.

Distribution companies are driven by good access to customers, a strong transportation infrastructure and a solid local workforce, said Myers.

As an example of how fast and driven the site selection process is, Myers used the example of "Project Snow," an actual project her company is working on — though under a different name. Myers said that the misdirection is to maintain the project's confidentiality.

For the project, she said, McCallum Sweeney had located 12 states containing 309 counties in a desirable area. The company sent out requests for information, heard from 121 sites, did an evaluation of what was sent back, narrowed it down to 20, visited 16 and only shortlisted eight for their client.

The process, sweeping as it was, only took two months, which Myers said illustrated how important it is for a site like Wildwood to be ready and appealing for companies interested in finding a home.

"We have to limit the number of sites we visit because of the time and funds it takes," she said.