

Groups build program to price shipping

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SORRENTO — The Ascension Economic Development Corp. agreed Thursday to pursue a regional logistics project that will show business prospects how much shipping their freight would cost if they locate a facility in the Baton Rouge region.

The development agency and economic development groups from West Feliciana and East Baton Rouge parishes would put up about \$8,000 each to gain matching funds from the state Department of Economic Development in a \$45,000 project to build custom software.

“Whether it’s rail, trucking or air cargo, we would build a model to be able to look at their costs coming in,” said AEDC President Tommy Kurtz. Mail freight and port shipping costs for prospective companies also could be analyzed.

The model will be built by Carter Burgess Inc., a Phoenix-based subsidiary of Jacobs Engineering.

The approach builds on geographic information system software, or GIS programs, that AEDC already is employing to show economic development prospects what locations in Ascension are best-suited for their companies.

For retail and professional businesses, the locations are likely to be in medium- to high-density population centers not far from Interstate 10.

Large industrial prospects will want good access to the interstate but will prize Mississippi River frontage and pipeline and rail access even more, along with a location that has sparse population, said Victor Leotta of C-K Associates, who has worked with the parish economic development group in building a flexible program of GIS data to sell the parish to prospects.

Much of the local data came from Ascension Parish’s GIS department, and Leotta’s firm has worked with the state and Entergy Corp. to compile other layers of data that create maps that rank sites for specific needs of different companies.

In a quarterly meeting at AEDC’s Sorrento office, the board also heard a presentation by Wil Williams of SSA Consultants in Baton Rouge about attracting smaller specialty chemical manufacturers who can locate near large bulk chemical plants in the parish.

AEDC is working with BASF in Geismar to attract such a plant called a downstream manufacturer, because it uses a chemical ingredient already in production at a larger “upstream” host plant.

Williams and Kurtz said several prospects ranging from Texas to the Czech Republic are interested in such products as hydrochloric acid, sulfur and surfactant production in the area.

An eventual company selecting a site near BASF might employ 50 or fewer people but would make a large capital investment and bring high-paying jobs, Williams said, helping pay for the steam pipeline, waste costs or other overhead of an existing large employer.

Williams said the model will be taken to other Ascension chemical plants.

“Over time, you build up multiple plants like these,” he said. “It also helps make the plants here more viable.”

In other news, the AEDC board:

- Took no action but discussed a possible new lease on its 7,000-square-foot food incubator with the Lamar-Dixon Expo Center that’s managed for the parish by SMG. Though AEDC is attempting to reduce the \$40,000 annual lease that expired in December to make the facility more competitive, SMG recently sought an increase to \$60,000 a year, something AEDC thinks will make the site less competitive for tenants of the Louisiana Edible Creations Center. The board agreed to wait until Parish President Tommy Martinez and an Ascension delegation return from a Washington, D.C., trip before continuing negotiations.
- Granted Kurtz a 3 percent cost-of-living increase and extended his contract two years through 2010. Kurtz received \$145,000 annually before the increase.
- Heard Kurtz report that AEDC is completing a study of potential costs for connecting a rail spur from nearby Terra Industries to Pointe Sunshine, AEDC’s proposed megasite for industrial development near the Sunshine Bridge below Donaldsonville. Entergy also is examining the required energy load and costs for supplying power to the site, something Kurtz said would save the parish \$10,000.

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