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Texas Energy Center Energizes Fort Bend County

By Mike Warren

The recent announcement of Japanese car manufacturer Toyota to build a facility in Texas is expected to create more than 7,000 jobs in the state when the facility opens in 2006.

Now imagine seven or more such manufacturers coming to Fort Bend County and the Houston region. That's the impact projected for the new Texas Energy Center (TxEC), located in Sugar Land, which is projected to create 50,000 to 100,000 new jobs for Texas.

"Because of the way Texas is aligned in the energy business, anything we are successful in doing will immediately translate to economic benefits to Houston and along the Gulf Coast," says Ron Oligney, Director of TxEC. "It's very easy to show that our activities could lead to tens of thousands of jobs."

Launched earlier this year, TxEC is a dynamic public-private sector effort that will

address long-term energy needs and keep Texas and the United States at the forefront of global energy technology. Patterned after the highly successful Texas Medical Center, this emerging cluster of cutting-edge research organizations, major corporations and leading universities will secure Houston's future as the hub of energy-related innovation and commerce.



Potential Home for TxEC Project



TxEC will concentrate on developing new technologies in four key areas: ultra-deepwater (state-of-the-art oil and gas exploration); advanced natural gas transportation and conversion; hydrogen and low-emission power plants; and clean energy (e.g. fuel

cells, wind power and energy-efficient housing).

"The impetus for the Texas Energy Center is that energy, in general, is very important to people throughout the world," Oligney says. "Since the lights went out in California in 2000 and gas prices have risen, energy has received a greater focus than ever."

Such ideas as converting largely to solar power or running automobiles with steam engines that use tap water are panaceas, Oligney says.

"We're grounded very much in reality and focused on answering questions about what we can deliver today and how we can aggressively push the transition to alternative types of energy without leaping too far," Oligney says. "The idea is to be credible in the energy debate, and Houston should take a leading role in research and development of new technologies."

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The federal government will likely spend an estimated \$2.1 billion to advance production technology needed to deliver known petroleum reserves from ultra-deepwater locations in the Gulf of Mexico, he says. Oligney notes that the ultra-deepwater resources contain more than twice the petroleum reserves of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge.

“Because Houston is home to nearly all of the industry’s current deepwater research and enjoys close proximity to the Gulf of Mexico, Houston is the logical site for management of the new Department of Energy program,” Oligney says. “Management of this program would bring as much as \$300 million a year for seven years to the area and would lead to enormous economic impacts as the reserves are exploited.”

In anticipation of the ultra-deepwater research program, TxEC has attracted a leading management consortium, the Research Partnership to Secure Energy for America (RPSEA), which represents a variety of corporation and university partners from the nation.

“RPSEA’s mission is to provide a stewardship role in ensuring the focused research, development and deployment of technology which can effectively deliver hydrocarbons from domestic reservoirs to the citizens of the United States,” says Rick Deans, President of RPSEA. “The key will be technology that results in reduced risk, reduced cost and reduced time.”

Other initial TxEC initiatives include:

Efforts to attract a world-class team that has the potential to win a contract for the technology development and construction of a \$1 billion federal government project to create the world’s first coal-based, zero-emission electric facility and power plant.

The utilization of up to \$15 million in state funding to support the Texas Consortium for Advanced Fuel Cell Research. The funds will be used to leverage federal and private industry research and development funds; to match federal and private investments in stationary and portable fuel cells; for hydrogen

infrastructure; demonstration and evaluation projects; for developing professional and technical curriculum and training building officials and operators; and to attract fuel cell companies to Texas.

David Wallace, Mayor of the City of Sugar Land, served as the Chairman of the Greater Fort Bend Economic Development Council’s Task Force for the creation of the TxEC. According to Wallace, other components of the TxEC will include partnerships with major Texas universities, incubators for energy technology companies and major energy corporations. TxEC will also feature an Energy Information Theater.

“If you get people working together in similar research fields, there is an acceleration of advances in technology and economic benefits,” Wallace says.

TxEC is currently located in the Fluor Daniel complex in Sugar Land. The center’s proposed permanent home is a research park being developed by the University of Houston System at Fort Bend near U.S. 59 and the Brazos River.

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“The Texas Energy Center is an example of the City of Sugar Land, Fort Bend County, the Greater Fort Bend Economic Development Council and other involved entities partnering to control their future pattern of growth, rather than trying to react in a random pattern,” says Fort Bend County Judge Bob Hebert. “I’m very pleased with the extent to which the Texas Energy Center has developed in a short period of time.

“There’s more to be done, but I’m confident, given the progress already made, that we’ll overcome any hurdles, and that the Texas Energy Center will become a landmark development.” ■