

'Green' tech center on horizon

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By Joe Pinchot
Herald Staff Writer

Hermitage city officials already were considering the environmental impact in their building projects, so it wasn't much of a stretch when federal officials said the city would have a better chance of getting funded to build a technology center if it was a green building, said Assistant City Manager Gary M. Gulla.

The building design was about 90 percent complete when the city committed to making the tech center a LEED-certified project, and already incorporated many green characteristics, said Greer Hayden, president of HHSDR Architects/Engineers, Sharon.



David E. Dale/Herald

Officials involved in building a technology center at LindenPointe technical business park, Hermitage, look over plans. The building site is in the background. From left are Greer Hayden of HHSDR Architects/Engineers, Sharon; Hermitage Assistant City Manager Gary M. Gulla; Dan Wallace and Brian Pancher of environmental engineering firm Wallace & Pancher, Hermitage; and City Manager Gary P. Hinkson.

The tech center at Linden- Pointe will be the first Mercer County building to be certified by the Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design program. Construction will be funded by a \$4.2 million federal grant and a \$1.25 million state grant, and city officials plan to award contracts in April.

The 15,000-square-foot center will house a testing laboratory for use by high-tech companies, five to seven technology business incubator suites, and common class, break, meeting, locker and rest room areas. The Pittsburgh Green Building Alliance, a nonprofit agency that consults on building projects, said the LEED certification takes into account the materials that are used in building, such as whether they were made from materials that were recycled or reused, responsibly harvested and nontoxic; the impact the building will have in terms of energy usage, waste generated, maintenance and other factors; and what happens at the end of the materials' life cycle, such as whether a material decomposes naturally or can be reused.

The LEED program assesses how far materials had to travel to get to the building site, and what the contractor does with waste, such as material packaging, Hayden said. Projects are assigned points based on these choices, and it takes 26 points to achieve LEED certification. Three higher certification levels are possible, and city officials are hoping to earn 33 points for silver certification.

The tech center will feature green characteristics such as natural lighting, a reflective roof, low-maintenance polished concrete floors, a geothermal heating system that will use ground water for heating and cooling, and rain gardens, collection depressions planted with certain vegetation to filter water that runs off the roof and paved surfaces, Hayden said.

It takes a commitment of an owner, an architect and the contractors to achieve LEED certification because of the extensive documentation that must be provided to prove the green building aspects of the project, Hayden said. He said he does not believe that will scare off contractors from bidding on the project. "I've been talking to the trade's people on some of our other projects," he said. "They think it's great. They want to be a part of it."

A running scorecard will be maintained on the Internet during construction so city officials, architects and contractors can monitor the progress of the certification, and learn where more documentation must be provided. Also during construction, the project will serve as a training site in green building techniques, and the alliance, of which HHS DR is a member, is helping write the curriculum. "It will be a living lab during construction," said Hayden, whose firm designed a LEED-certified career center renovation and addition project that is being built in the North Hills of Pittsburgh.

Holly Childs, executive director of the alliance, said her agency runs training programs for contractors, works with labor unions on technical matters and aids architects and engineers. "We've never done what they are asking us to do — training the contractors onsite," she said. That aspect is one that makes this project unique for the alliance, which has worked on 150 projects since 1993, Ms. Childs said.

The alliance is making an in-depth review of HHS DR's plans, but already has made design recommendations and will be a part of the process throughout the building cycle. "They're involved on a daily basis and can guide us on what is the best alternative for a particular situation," Hayden said. HHS DR brought the alliance into the project, and the alliance, an affiliate of the U.S. Green Building Council, which developed the LEED program, jumped at the chance to participate, Ms. Childs said.

"We were excited to get involved because it's hard to learn about projects outside of Pittsburgh," she said. The tech center will be the alliance's first project working directly with a municipal government. "It's been driven by the private companies," she said of green building. While in Philadelphia for a conference, Ms. Childs lobbied federal officials who were reviewing the city's funding application, including some officials who had met with Gulla and toured the site. "They were really excited that the Green Building Alliance was involved and that they (city officials) were looking at doing a LEED-certified building," Ms. Childs said.

LindenPointe already has some green design elements in it, such as the wetlands built on the east side of the park, stormwater-handling facilities and the walking trail system that loops throughout the park, Gulla said. Officials hope to be able to build another trail spur connecting the cluster made up of the tech center, its sister building, the workforce training and development building, and private company Information Resource Technology with Butler County Community College's campus on the northeast side of the park. This part of the plan will be an alternative bid, and completion will depend on how the bids compare to the construction money available. Along with the spur, officials want to build a shaded seating area that could be used by anyone in the park. "I'm pretty excited to be a part of this project," Gulla said. "I think it's good for the region to be able to have a project like this that will be a poster project. I hope we'll have other entities looking at this project."

City officials also hope the center will spur development within the park — including more green projects — and in the region. Keeping with the regional theme, Gulla said the support by a number of multi-county agencies played a crucial role in scoring federal funds, including OH-PENN, the five county collaborative economic development efforts in Ohio and Pennsylvania. “I would say that this project is the first big win for the OH-PENN collaboration,” Gulla said, noting that Youngstown Mayor Jay Williams endorsed the tech center. “It’s a regional resource that will pay dividends regionally and link the OH-PENN region to Pittsburgh and Cleveland,” he said.

Ms. Childs, who has worked in rural and urban economic development, said city officials are “smart” for proposing the tech center, trying to attract new kinds of industries, and thinking long-term. “It’s very difficult for a city to say, ‘We’re going to pay big bucks and lock in the next Microsoft,’ or the next big employer,” she said.

As construction moves along, officials will have to develop the criteria for businesses that will be allowed to be housed in the incubator. They want to focus on what are known as STEM businesses: science, technology, engineering and math companies. City officials have met agents of the Youngstown Business Incubator, the Technology Collaborative of Pittsburgh and the Gannon Small Business Development Center, Erie, about the intake process, Gulla said.

Businesses must be able to show credible business development plans. Many entrepreneurs have focused on product development, and do not put the same emphasis on running the business, Gulla said. Hermitage Community and Economic Development Commission will help develop the intake process and criteria that ultimately will be adopted by the commissioners, he said.

Paul Young, the volunteer coordinator of the workforce building, wants to play a role in the management of the tech center, Gulla said.

Information: www.lindenpointe.com