

## Eagle Editorials

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### Grant, land deal can seed future

In the middle of this nightmare of a recession, it takes some faith and imagination to see an economic development dream as worthy of investment.

Yet Wichita got a \$4 million vote of confidence Tuesday from the Kansas Bioscience Authority in the community's potential to be a hub for the research, development and manufacturing of advanced composite materials suitable for medical devices as well as aircraft, with an expectation of a total \$20 million to come over five years.

Good for scientists at Via Christi Health and Wichita State University and its National Institute for Aviation Research for selling their vision of the Center of Innovation for Biomaterials in Orthopaedic Research to the board of the Kansas Bioscience Authority.

And good for the KBA board for seeing and believing in that vision, adding Wichita's center to other KBA-seeded "centers of innovation" around the state dedicated to bioenergy and biorefining, advanced plant design and drug delivery.

Tuesday's long-awaited announcement was particularly sweet given some problems with communication and trust that preceded it. Fortunately, talk of favoritism and foot-dragging didn't detract from the grant proposal, nor did the state budget crisis.

Instead, those involved understood that Wichita's long-standing expertise in composites used for aviation makes it the perfect place to do market-driven work on composites for use in medical instruments and implants and orthopedic medicine generally. The grant is the most visible sign yet that Wichita stands to see a sizable benefit from the 2004 Kansas Economic Growth Act, which created the KBA.

The partners on the project -- which include Pittsburg State University and Kansas State University -- believe it could lead to 2,600 well-paying jobs in the first decade.

That's a rare bit of optimistic news for an area economy that has seen aviation employment drop 21 percent since November, according to the Workforce Alliance of South Central Kansas.

Meanwhile, the Sedgwick County Commission may proceed today with an ambitious and forward-looking 808-acre land deal to create a "shovel-ready" industrial park in Bel Aire catering to companies in the composites and alternative-energy fields.

As county chief financial officer Chris Chronis told commissioners last week: "The government is doing it because nobody else has done it.... We have suffered by the absence of a resource like this in this community."

If commissioners satisfy their concerns and approve the purchase, this could be a pivotal week in realizing the community's efforts to grow its economy in a high-tech way that builds upon, rather than relies upon, the volatile aviation manufacturing industry.

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*For the editorial board, Rhonda Holman*