Cluster still strong

Losing Boeing won’t keep Wichita from aggressively pursuing a future for itself in aircraft and other kinds of manufacturing. That was the important message sent Tuesday in conjunction with Bombardier Learjet’s expansion and Wichita State University’s federally funded work on advanced materials.

Local and state leaders rallied over the past two months to enable a $52.7 million, 450-job Bombardier Learjet expansion accommodating a paint facility, a preflight facility and a new delivery center. The city of Wichita and Sedgwick County each agreed to pay $1 million for new parking to be leased to Learjet at Wichita Mid-Continent Airport. On Tuesday Gov. Sam Brownback announced the deal for state incentives worth $16 million.

That quick, efficient collaboration means Bombardier’s local workforce of 2,800 is sure to grow, starting soon with about 100 new jobs. It followed the 2010 bond-financing agreement with the state to assemble and finish the company’s new eight-passenger, intercontinental Learjet 85 in Wichita, which further fortified the local roots of the company that Bill Lear moved to Wichita in 1962.

It’s important to note that Bombardier favored Wichita with the work over Tucson and Montreal, and that the expansion-related jobs have been estimated to average $118,000 in the first year.

Score one for Wichita, in the form of hundreds of new jobs and a $60 million sustained annual payroll.

As Brownback said Tuesday, “We have the infrastructure here. We have the suppliers here. We have an excellent trained, competent, dedicated workforce. We have the research that’s here. These are all the components to make this a fabulous aviation cluster, and clearly is.”

Meanwhile, Tuesday also found WSU highlighting the nearly $2 million in grants its year-old Center for Innovation and Enterprise Engagement recently won as part of the Obama administration’s $37 million Jobs and Innovation Accelerator Challenge grant competition, and how the investment already is accelerating development of the area’s composites and advanced materials industry cluster.

“They’re off to a good start here,” John Fernandez, U.S. assistant secretary of commerce for economic development, told The Eagle editorial board, also saying that Wichita has “a lot of really strong assets that can be leveraged.”

Something Fernandez’s boss said in Cleveland last year about the “cluster concept” and the Jobs and Innovation Accelerator Challenge can resonate for Wichita: “When you get a group of people together, and industries together, and institutions like universities together around particular industries,” President Obama said, “then the synergies that develop from all those different facets coming together can make the whole the greater than the sum of its parts.”

That can still be true for Wichita, even when it loses a part of itself as integral and identifiable as Boeing has been for 85 years.

For the editorial board, Rhonda Holman