

## Officials hope business park will bring industry, create jobs



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Officials continue to move forward with county's multi-jurisdictional business park, a project expected to bring economic development opportunities to Catawba County.

"New jobs and tax base are the desired result," said Scott Millar, Catawba County Economic Development Corporation president.

Catawba County, Hickory, Maiden, Conover and Catawba, announced their intent to participate in the business park.

"It's their signal that they want to develop a final agreement," Millar said.

The municipalities and their respective governing bodies signed letters of intent declaring their interest in the multi-jurisdictional park.

"It's a benefit for the future more so than it is for residents now," said Catawba Mayor Vance Reading.

Catawba's budget for fiscal year 2010-11 reflects a 1 percent interest in the project, which is about \$55,000. The town will invest about \$11,200 every year for five years.

"It's a long-term investment, but we think it's going to pay off in the future," Reading said.

Catawba is expected to regain its investment in the park in eight or nine years.

Officials selected a 159-acre property in north Conover near Wal-Mart for the business park, but the park's location is not definitive.

"That's definitely an option," Millar said. "But it may not be the only option."

The business park will require a \$3- to 5-million investment during a five-year period. Participating municipalities chose to invest a predetermined percentage of money in the business park, and they will receive monetary benefits from the park based on their initial investment.

"They share the costs, and they also share the tax benefits," Millar said.

Local governments' new fiscal year started July 1, and municipalities discussed possible involvement in the business park agreement during budget workshops.

"We're in the next fiscal year, so a lot of our concern was to get some of the funding discussed," Millar said.

The Catawba County Board of Commissioners said participation in the multi-jurisdictional park is one of its goals for the 2010-11 fiscal year.

"As (the park) is developed, it will create jobs, as well as increase our tax base," said Kitty Barnes, Board of Commissioners chairwoman. "It's a way of working together to create economic development."

Barnes said she doesn't yet know how much the county's involvement in the park will cost.

"That's just part of what we don't know until we get further down the path," Barnes said, adding that similar projects often require water and sewer infrastructure to be completed.

Officials are currently working to establish right-of-ways for the project, and construction is expected to start in the fall.

The business park is designed for high-investment companies, and Millar said the park's target market is data centers.

"We will move incrementally, so it won't be too much for any one municipality," Millar said.

Maiden plans to invest 5 percent in the project. Participation in the park will give the town an opportunity for economic development that might not be possible without support from other municipalities.

"We hope to recruit a large tax base company or companies, but to do that, in most cases, requires that local government to spend a lot of funds on infrastructure and other items," said Maiden Town Manager Todd Herms. "By taking the multi-jurisdictional park approach, it allows the cost to be spread out over several different local governments, and in return, all participating local governments receive a portion of the revenues generated from the project."

The municipalities' cooperation will also entice businesses to Catawba County, Herms said.

"We owe it to our citizens to do everything possible, even if that means recruiting jobs outside our cities and towns, in order to give them the opportunity to better their lives with good, higher-than-average paying jobs," Herms said. "If this is not one of our top priorities, then we are not doing our duty as local government officials."

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