



Print Page

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Business park nears completion

By JUDY D.J. ELLICH
Daily American Staff Writer

Momentum has picked up for creating a shovel-ready Laurel Highlands Business Park along Route 31 in Somerset Township.

Thursday afternoon a sign visible from the turnpike advertised plots for sale at the park and a notice to call the Somerset County Economic Development Council with inquiries. The sign was erected by a crew from Weyand Sign & Lighting Maintenance of Stoystown.



Demolition work and the restoration of the property where a house, two barns and two silos were once located adjacent to Route 31 East was completed Friday. Columbia Gas will extend natural gas service into the park by the end of next week.

County engineers are finalizing the permit process and have agreements with the following utility providers: Penelec, Columbia Gas, Comcast, Verizon and Somerset Township for water and sewer.

Engineers are planning the last of the designs — for road and all utilities infrastructure — to release for public bid by the end of the year with a goal of springtime construction.

“It will be fully ready to go by early to mid-summer 2010,” said project engineer Jon Wahl of Somerset Planning & Engineering Services.

Earthmovers of Leesport was awarded the \$85,000 contract for the demolition phase.

The county and Columbia Gas are working together to place a gas pipeline into the park. The county’s expense was about \$200,000 for the excavation and restoration and for the turnpike sign. Columbia Gas provided the labor.

“It was a good project,” Wahl said about the partnership. “We will now have a more than adequate supply of gas with the total build-out of the park.”

The economic development council recently got the go-ahead from the Somerset County Authority to be the point of contact for interested buyers. The authority owns the 108-acre business park and is developing the property in conjunction with the county.

“We are marketing the land and we will start fielding calls and assisting interested parties,” said council Executive Director Jeff Silka. “It is what we do best.”

The council's role began the day the sign went up, he said. The sign is expected to stir local interest.

Two "drivers" for potential tenants and development are "publicity and visibility," Silka said.

Earlier this year, the Somerset County commissioners joined several school districts and municipalities to forgo taxes on nearly 700 acres, including the Laurel Highlands Business Park, in an effort to create jobs and attract new businesses.

The taxing bodies agreed to a 10-year extension of Keystone Opportunity Zones, or designated areas that give property owners, residents and business owners who locate there certain state and local tax breaks.

The park will be subdivided to accommodate different business classifications, from light industrial and technology-based businesses to manufacturing.

The land was originally owned by the state. It was transferred to the county for \$290,000 in 2008. The commissioners are using a combination \$3.4 million state grant and low-interest loan to help build the park.

(Judy D.J. Ellich can be contacted at judy@daillyamerican.com. Comment on the online story at daillyamerican.com.)

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814.444.5900