

Coalfield Progress – October 2, 2009

Coal research center raises high hopes By: JODI DEAL / Staff Writer

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WISE — The Pulaski-based Nanochemonics Inc. started 130 years ago as an iron ore manufacturer developed by Welsh miners.

Over the years, the company has shifted focus every 25 years or so, specializing at different times in paints, 8-track tapes, computer tapes, video tapes and elements of printer cartridges, all using tiny particles of iron oxide.

Now, it wants in on the ground floor of special technology using tiny particles to remove sulfur and mercury from coal before it's burned, and from flue gas after combustion. The company is also working on ways to remove heavy metals from flyash to allow greater use of the coal combustion byproducts, which are frequently dumped in landfills.

Nanochemonics President Tim Hopkins told a crowd of about 50 local and regional officials Thursday that while he isn't from Wise County, the previous seven generations of his family are.

Wise County was a logical location for a new laboratory focused on energy industry research, Hopkins said. That new laboratory is on its way.

Hopkins and the rest of the crowd were gathered to break ground on the \$7 million Appalachia America Energy Research Center and Advanced Energy Research Laboratory, which is already under construction in the Lonesome Pine Business and Technology Park.

Many who spoke at Thursday's ceremony pointed to the new research center, which they hope will one day hold other tenants like Nanochemonics, as a piece of a much bigger puzzle.

"The energy industry and energy-related fields will be the industry of the 21st century. They already are," said Jonathan Belcher, executive director of the Virginia Coalfield Economic Development Authority, which helped fund the center.

Belcher and others expressed hope that energy research will not only help prolong the life of the coal industry, but will provide a new industry to help develop Southwest Virginia.

"We're pioneering again," Hopkins said, pointing out that the coal industry is what led to the original explosion of development in Southwest Virginia. "We have a new thing to explore, which is energy."

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE



Nanochemonics President Tim Hopkins, at right, is proud of his Wise County roots. His father Atwell Hopkins, at left, and mother, Marcella, second from right, grew up in Big Stone Gap, where his grandmother Helen Wright still lives.

State Del. Clarence "Bud" Phillips pointed out that Thursday's event is one of several Southwest Virginia economic development announcements in recent months, despite a sluggish economy.

"That's not just by chance," Phillips said. "We in Southwest Virginia, through the Tobacco Commission, VCEDA and local folks, we're all very hungry to see things change in this region for the better."

Del. Terry Kilgore expressed hopes that the research center will provide opportunities for students at local colleges to not only learn close to home, but find work here once school is through.

UVa-Wise Chancellor David Prior has high hopes, too.

Colleges, public schools, industry and government are working together more than ever before, Prior said. Keeping that up, and staying creative, could mean big things for Wise County.

"This may be a Los Alamos or an Oak Ridge. This may become an energy triangle," Prior said. "This could be the start of a hub of research activity."

HOMETOWN ROOTS

Smiling at the rear of the tent at Thursday's event were proud parents Atwell and Marcella Hopkins, and grandmother Helen Wright.

Wright still lives in Big Stone Gap, where Tim Hopkins' parents grew up. Atwell's family has strong Melungeon roots, Tim pointed out, while the Wrights come from Cherokee stock.

The Hopkins have a cabin in Big Stone Gap that the family visits often.

"My ancestors had a farm over in the Wildcat section," Hopkins said after the ceremony. He noted that he has a keen interest in local history and genealogy. He also feels a strong connection to the coal industry, he noted. Several of his ancestors were miners, including his paternal grandfather, who entered the mines at nine years old.

ABOUT THE CENTER

Construction on the 24,000-square-foot center, located at the southeastern corner of the tech park, is expected wrap up in time for a mid-2010 opening.

For now, the building will cover 24,000 square feet, with 14,000 square feet of finished office and laboratory space for NanoChemonics. Some 10,000 square feet will be left as shell space for future tenants.

The building is financed with \$5 million in grants from the Virginia Tobacco Commission and a \$1.045 million grant and \$955,000 loan package from VCEDA. The Tobacco Commission has also committed operating funds to help run the facility for its first few years in business.