

It's time to pick up the pieces following Tenneco announcement

Written by Elizabeth Barrett
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Economic development groups on mission to help find new jobs for Tenneco employees.

Cozad and other Dawson County officials are working to help Tenneco Automotive Monroe employees find jobs before the Cozad plant closes at the end of 2010.

After the announcement on Sept. 22 that Tenneco planned to shut down shock-absorber manufacturing operations in Cozad, Dawson Area Development and Cozad Development Corporation took action.

Jen Wolf, DAD director, said she contacted employers in Dawson, Lincoln and Buffalo counties to find out anticipated employment needs in the next year.

That information was forwarded to Tenneco.

Wolf said DAD also looked at matching specific skills desired by prospective employers to what Tenneco employees could offer.

She also discovered that the three-county area could probably absorb 150 of the 500 workers who will be displaced.

DAD is also in contact with state and Central Community College officials in getting training money for Tenneco workers to transition into new types of jobs.

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“At this point, we don’t have demand for 500 jobs so we’re taking one at a time like one or two employers who need a certain skill,” Wolf explained. “Our hope is that they won’t have to move out of the county if they don’t want to.”

In addition, DAD is also exploring other options such as recruiting a business or industry to move into the county to take advantage of the available labor force.

Quarterly job fairs are also in the plan.

Wolf said the first one will probably be in November for any employer interested in labor. Before that, however, she said DAD plans to host an event to teach job-hunting skills such as how to write a resume and give an interview.

She added that DAD has careers listed on its Web site at www.dawsoncountycareers.com and plans to add a link specifically for Tenneco employees about upcoming events such as hiring fairs.

“The fairs will target Tenneco employees but they’re for anyone,” Wolf said.

Based on national statistics, Wolf said many people in the automotive industry who were laid off have been forced to take jobs with lesser pay.

“That’s a hard pill to swallow around here,” she said.

As a result, Wolf said DAD has been in contact with agencies that offer counseling in such things as budgeting and adjusting to a different lifestyle.

Robyn Geiser, president of Cozad Development Corporation, said her organization is targeting

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industries that might be interested in locating in Cozad. CDC plans to build a spec building for industry.

Wolf and Geiser are also planning to attend events in and out of state to market Cozad, the Tenneco building and its employees.

Entrepreneurship opportunities are also an option.

A couple of Tenneco employees are researching how they could start up a small business. Assistance from the Rural Enterprise Assistance Project (REAP) and downtown revitalization grants in both Cozad and Gothenburg are available.

Wolf said both Gothenburg and Cozad have each set aside \$100,000 in grant money for anyone wanting to locate a new business in the downtown areas.

DAD and CDC are also in contact with the offices of Sen. Ben Nelson and Rep. Adrian Smith.

Interestingly, the closing of Tenneco has some striking similarities to when Sperry New Holland in Lexington—then the county's largest employer—shut its doors as demand for farm equipment dropped dramatically.

Wolf said Tenneco peaked at 760 employees in 2006 while Sperry New Holland workers numbered between 750 to 800 at one time.

Layoffs at Sperry New Holland brought the employee population to about 430 compared to 500 at Tenneco when its closure was announced.

Peak payroll at the combine manufacturing plant was estimated at \$15.6 million annually

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compared to Tenneco at more than \$15 million.

Wolf said Ford bought the Lexington plant in 1985, closed the doors and moved some of the workers to Grand Island.

In 1989, in response to the number of workers without jobs, Lexington, Cozad and Gothenburg joined together to form an economic development organization which was DAD.

These days, the role of DAD has changed a bit as the organization tries to deal with the closing of the second-largest industry in the county.

“We’re taking it one day at a time and there’s no guide on how to get there,” Wolf said. “We’ve been visiting with other communities who have gone through similar situations and continue to plug forward.

“We’re open to any suggestions.”

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