City, state, county officials market building, help employees.

Some jobs will end at Tenneco Monroe in Cozad in four weeks.

As the shock-absorber manufacturing business winds down operations, layoffs are scheduled quarterly through the end of 2010.

Officials announced on Sept. 22 that the plant—with 500 employees—would close the end of 2010 largely because demand for its products has dropped.

Jay Edwards, human resources director at the plant, said 26 employees will transfer to a Tenneco plant in Paragould, AR, by Dec. 31 while 16 others have chosen not to move.

“Their jobs will end the end of December,” Edwards said, noting that two employees are interested in relocating to another Tenneco plant in Hartwell, GA.

Cozad employees who can perform the same or similar job in Paragould were offered that opportunity and some agreed to go, he said.

More jobs end next spring

Edwards said jobs for a larger group of Tenneco employees will end the first quarter of 2010 in March and April with another layoff scheduled in June and July.

One more layoff could occur in September/October before the plant closes in December.

“As our business transfers, people can move with the business or not and receive severance pay and go from there,” he said.

Because a Tenneco plant in Seward received additional business, Edwards said Tenneco officials hope there will be more transfer opportunities.

Edwards, who has been human resources manager at the plant for almost 13 years, said closure is not something they want to see happen.

“But it’s important it’s handled correctly so people know the options available to them so they can make a good decision on what to do with the rest of their lives,” he said. “At this point, our folks have been extremely positive in their approach and our plant continues to perform very well.”

That’s indicative of Tenneco employees and “how they want to make sure they go out the right way,” Edwards said.

JEN WOLF

City, county and state officials have been far from idle since company officials announced the closure.

Cozad Development Corporation and the Nebraska Department of Economic Development are trying to market the building while others, like Jen Wolf and CDC director Robyn Geiser, are actively marketing Cozad and the Tenneco and recently vacated Tabora Farms Bakery buildings at national conventions and conferences, according to Wolf who directs Dawson Area Development.

Marketing challenges exist

Wolf, who directs Dawson Area Development, said it's difficult to market the Tenneco building because it won't be vacant until 2011.

Still, she and other officials like Geiser, are getting the word out about Cozad and the Tenneco and Tabora Farms buildings.

Wolf will travel to Ft. Lauderdale, FL, next week to market the buildings to 30 site selectors.

Companies hire site selectors to locate communities suited to their environments, she explained, noting that a site selector chose North Platte for the Walmart distribution center because of transportation and warehousing opportunities in the area.

Although Wolf said she'd like to keep displaced Tenneco employees in the county, she said the Paragould plant was aggressive in giving them the same shift, the ability to select the same position and pay a transfer allowance.

Because several employees have found new jobs, DAD postponed a scheduled job fair in November until January.

Wolf noted that employees who lose their job at Tenneco are eligible for job benefits and for training within a two-year period before entering a different career.

Training costs include books, tuition and mileage.

For employees more than 50 years of age, new trade training benefits are available for up to two years if they are hired at a lower wage than what they made at Tenneco.

Wolf said employees have and will continue to receive help with financial planning and interview and resume writing skills, counseling and who to contact for help.

“There is so much information that a lot of the employees we’ve visited with are confused,” she said. “I think people are overwhelmed with all the decisions they have to make.”

Development plan in works

Wolf said DAD, Tenneco and Lexington and Cozad city officials are also moving forward with the Nebraska Department of Labor and the Economic Development Administration on a regional economic development plan.

“We’re eligible for some money to help create a plan that identifies the impact (of Tenneco’s closing) on our area and strategies to help mitigate that impact,” she said, noting that money could be used to hire a consultant.

Included in the that plan is one for entrepreneurship for small businesses that will be affected by the plant’s closing.

“That could be service providers to Tenneco like restaurants and cleaning services,” Wolf said.

Some Tenneco employees have also expressed interest in starting new businesses like a machine shop or catering business.

“These are all kinds of possibilities,” she said.

Wolf said she thinks there are opportunities created by the closing of Tenneco.

“I hate to see Tenneco go,” she said, “but as one door closes, several more will open.”

Tenneco’s hourly workforce in Cozad includes 50 employees from Gothenburg with 115 from Lexington. Forty-four are from other towns and the remainder—252—are residents of Cozad.

There are 39 salaried employees.

Job opportunities are posted on Web sites like dawsoncountycareers.com and nebraskaworkforce.com.

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