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Updated: 09/05/2014 09:32:37 AM EDT

BerkshireEagle.com

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PITTSFIELD -- With all signs pointing to strong support, the City Council made it official this week by approving \$250,000 in start-up funds for the Berkshire Innovation Center planned at the William Stanley Business Park.

Councilors OK'd the use of \$250,000 from the GE Economic Development Fund to help cover startup costs for the 20,000-square-foot facility, which will be constructed with \$9.7 million in state funding through the Massachusetts Life Sciences Center.

"This is exactly what the fund was set up to do," said Ward 4 Councilor Christopher Connell. The money was set aside by GE for development and job creation in the city as part of a consent decree agreement 14 years ago that led to an environmental cleanup of former GE industrial sites in Pittsfield.

Other than a few unpointed questions about long-term prospects to bring in enough revenue to sustain the center's annual budgets, councilors mostly offered glowing praise for the opportunity the facility presents for countywide job creation.

"To me, this is the most important vote we have taken so far this year," said Councilor at large Kathleen Amuso.

Supporters of the request from Mayor Daniel L. Bianchi for the startup funding, including a number of local business leaders, turned out in force to reiterate details of the proposal -- and express why they believe it could bolster the manufacturing revival here.

The nonprofit "private sector-led" center is expected to sustain itself through fees from member firms and organizations, grants such as for research, and income from training, video conferencing and other services.

Other revenue is expected from rental of sophisticated industrial equipment and testing facilities, which smaller companies could not otherwise afford.

City Community Development Director Douglas Clark said the "conservative" business plan developed for the center was unanimously endorsed by the Life Sciences Center board in deciding to provide the construction grant. If revenues are lower than expected during the first two startup years, he said, there is room for further adjustments on expenses and costs to address that.

In answer to councilor questions, he said the intention is to ensure the center is self-sustaining and not require further allocations from the development fund.

In addition to the \$250,000 for startup costs over the next two years, the Pittsfield Economic Development Authority board is expected to match that amount this month. PEDDA is a quasi-public agency charged with development of the Stanley Business Park.

"It took a lot to get here tonight," said PEDDA board Chairman Mick Callahan, but now, he said, the building "is going to go vertical at 901 East Street."

Enthusiasm among the local businesses seeking to become members of the center is strong, Clark said, and that bodes well for the success of the facility. In addition to small manufacturing firms, a number of institutions of higher education from the region are expected to participate.

The intention is to have the nonprofit center programming ready to begin by the time construction is complete in 2016, and to have the organization's structure completed and staff members hired.

The center, which originally was planned as an industrial incubator space, morphed into a collaborative organization offering a wide range of expertise, training for precision manufacturing procedures and specialized equipment to help speed research, design and product development for local companies. Based in part on those changes, the state board upped an original \$6.5 million grant promise to \$9.7 million.

In praising the BIC concept, Ward 2 Councilor Kevin Morandi said it offers the potential to bring in some much needed jobs, many of which are expected to be good-paying skilled manufacturing positions. In addition, he said, "This will put Pittsfield on the map" as a burgeoning manufacturing center.

Fruition of the center plan is an example of the community taking time to develop the best possible facility to become a spur for economic development, said Ward 6 Councilor John Krol.

Ward 5 Councilor Jonathan Lothrop lauded "all the hard work you've done on this," adding, "I can't wait to attend the groundbreaking."

The council vote to approve the funding was greeted by sustained applause from supporters in council chambers at City Hall.

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