

Site change for Berkshire Innovation Center

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PITTSFIELD && The Pittsfield Economic Development Authority voted unanimously Wednesday to approve a new location for the Berkshire Innovation Center within the William Stanley Business Park of the Berkshires.

The new site is on a 4-acre parcel on the west side of Woodlawn Avenue, between the CSX Railroad tracks and East Street. On maps it is referred to as the third of the 52-acre park's nine building sites.

The board previously considered constructing the 20,000-square-foot structure on a 2.1-acre parcel on the east side of Woodlawn Avenue that borders directly on East Street.

The BIC has been proposed as an accelerator facility that will provide local companies that supply products to the life sciences industry access to advanced equipment, and as a job training hub. The city received a \$9.7 million state grant last year to construct the two-story facility, expected to open by the summer of 2016.

The PEDDA Board's Executive Committee approved the switch to the new parcel on Feb. 2. Both during and after the meeting, officials said the new site is better suited to the type of facility that the city hopes to construct.

"This site creates a new campus environment," said PEDDA Board Chairman Maurice Callahan. Over the long term, Callahan said the new site is more amenable to expansion and would allow officials to "build out in stages."

"We feel the campus setting is a real win for PEDDA and the park," said Stephen Boyd, chairman of the BIC Board of Directors. The site is flatter than the one originally under consideration, Boyd said, and will allow for the construction of a "slightly wider" two-story structure.

That kind of structure will allow the heavy equipment that the BIC will house for reverse engineering and research and development to be located on the same floor, which will eliminate the need for freight elevators, Boyd said. He said two thirds of the new site could be utilized for additional development.

The previous site, located between East Street and a parking lot, was narrower, included a "capped area" that is prohibited from development, and was limited in width, said PEDDA's Executive Director Cory Thurston.

"It's a better site to do more creative work," Thurston said.

Boyd termed the date to begin construction of the BIC as "the \$9.7 million question," a reference to the state money the city received to build the facility.

He said the ground-breaking could occur in either May or June, but "certainly within the 2015 building season."

The board on Wednesday also voted unanimously to allow Thurston to represent PEDDA in lease negotiations for the BIC and the authority to negotiate a Tax Increment Financing agreement, or TIF, with city officials.

TIFs are programs the city offers to private businesses. Participating entities typically receive tax breaks from the city on a sliding scale over a fixed number of years, provided they satisfy both job creation requirements and a prearranged sum of private investment.

Community Development Director Douglas Clark said the TIF program for the BIC was "brought forward" because the BIC is a private-public partnership between the city of Pittsfield and PEDDA. The building will be a municipal facility but is located on land that is maintained by PEDDA.

Mayor Daniel L. Bianchi, a PEDDA board member, abstained from the voting on the site change and the measures involving Thurston's participation because the BIC is scheduled to be a municipal building.

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