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THE ANATOMY OF A DEAL

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It takes much more than a home-grown governor to bring money to a community.

The 13-year process that led to last week's \$30 million capital budget allocation from Gov. Tom Ridge for the construction of the new Research and Economic Development Center at Penn State Behrend proves that point, according to those who took part in the process.

Securing state capital budget money for a local project involves years of planning, lobbying and building support. It also involves knowing how to negotiate the system, which is something local leaders have been able to do with increasing success in recent years.

"Successful fundraising campaigns are the result of decades of work," said Jake Rouch, executive director of the Erie Conference on Community Development, which played a key part in getting the Behrend proposal on the governor's desk. "Erie County has done a very good job of forming coalitions behind a diverse set of projects. We've also done a very good job of educating ourselves."

Part of that education has come through the work of the Erie Conference's Community Coalition, which was cited both by state officials and by Penn State Behrend provost John Lilley as playing an important role in getting the money for the new center.

The Erie Conference, an organization comprised of CEOs from Erie-based companies that works to promote regional progress and growth, has pulled together local elected officials and leaders from private business, non-profit organizations and higher education institutions to develop a priority list of regional capital budget projects. That list is then forwarded to key state officials, including the governor.

According to Rouch, the projects that top the list tend to get attention on the state level because those projects have earned the support of a cross-section of local leaders -- not because they are projects that are supported by narrow interest groups.

Simply creating a wish list, however, is not enough. Each project must satisfy a need, fit an agenda and have a well-articulated goal. As a result, the coalition works to gather information about key projects, with the idea that the information will prove that the projects are well thought-out and will answer the administration's questions.

"We also agreed that if, for whatever reason, the administration wanted to fund number 15, we wouldn't say 'no, don't fund 15 until you do one to 14,'" Rouch said.

The coalition has twice put the Behrend project near the top of its list -- ranking it third in 1996 and in 1999, according to the governor's office.

That ranking is not arbitrary, Rouch said. It was the result of a well-designed plan that was hatched back in 1987 by Lilley and had developed throughout the '90s. By the time it had earned the support of the coalition, it was a key piece of Behrend's future expansion plans and was seen by Erie business leaders as a project that would help promote regional economic development.

In the meantime, Behrend officials were busy forming other partnerships, making sure the new center would be available to the region's other higher education institutions. Students and researchers from Gannon University, Edinboro University of Pennsylvania, Mercyhurst College and the Northwest Pennsylvania Technical Institute, for example, would have access to the center and its programs.

That fact made the proposal especially attractive to Ridge, who is looking for capital improvements that benefit more than one institution.

"We're going to make an effort to make this a regional asset," Ridge said in announcing the \$30 million allocation Thursday. "It's a collaborative enterprise."

Indeed, the Behrend proposal fits well with Ridge's agenda as he enters the final two years of his tenure. In an interview following the announcement, Ridge said he is working to promote Pennsylvania as a destination for young, tech-savvy workers as a vehicle for promoting economic growth.

This winter, the Ridge administration will be rolling out a new program, called "Brain Gain," designed to engage the state's secondary school and college students and track them toward jobs at Pennsylvania-based companies, he said.

The new Behrend center, which will allow the college to expand its School of Business and School of Engineering and will create new partnerships with regional businesses, meshes well with the new program, Ridge said.

"There is nothing more important for Pennsylvania's future than to retain the people who come from its secondary schools and colleges and universities," Ridge said.

After 13 years, Lilley's dream of building the center had its most powerful ally. It also had the support of its community, making it a certain candidate for state money.

"There are a lot of things that came together," Rouch said. "There's no question, from what (Ridge) said, that this is the type of thing the governor realizes will help put us on the map."

That point is echoed by Erie business leaders. Still, they say Ridge would not have simply handed Lilley an oversized check this week if the Behrend plan wasn't well developed -- regardless of whether it fit his agenda or is located in his hometown.

"Obviously, the governor has a soft spot for the region," said Paul C. "Hoop" Roche, president and CEO of Erie Plastics. "But that can help us and it can hurt us."

Indeed, politics dictates that the governor cannot simply funnel money to Erie without justification, Rouch said. As a result, local proposals need to be nearly air tight before Ridge will sign a check.

"Erie County's greatest advantage is the state knows more about our projects than any other projects in the commonwealth," Rouch said. "Erie County's greatest disadvantage is the state knows more about our projects than any other projects in the commonwealth."

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