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\$30 million center planned at Behrend

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Staff writer

HARRISBURG -- When Gov. Tom Ridge strides to the microphone at Penn State Behrend's campus Thursday, he will announce \$30 million in state money to build a research and economic development center for the region.

The grant is believed to be the largest single infusion of state money from a governor's discretionary fund for one building project in Erie County's history. Expanded housing at the state prison in Albion received \$10.8 million. The governor gave the student activities center at Behrend \$10 million.

Thursday's gift is likely the largest in the state outside Philadelphia and Pittsburgh, which received similar amounts for stadiums, airports and convention centers.

The new center - to be located at Behrend's Knowledge Park - is expected to be of special significance to plastics manufacturers and tool-and-die companies, major employers in northwestern Pennsylvania, said a source close to the college.

Few details have been released and officials in the Ridge administration and at Behrend refuse to comment on the announcement until Thursday.

"Are we announcing something Thursday up in Erie?" Ridge joked with a reporter last week after a Menorah-lighting ceremony at the state Capitol. "I will have a major announcement on Thursday. I'd like to be able to confirm it but I can't."

Steve Aaron, a spokesman for Ridge, said he could reveal only that the announcement would be "one of historic proportions, not only for Penn State in Erie but of tremendous impact for all of northwestern Pennsylvania."

The idea for a research and economic development center dates to 1997, when the Erie Conference on Community Development, which prioritizes projects for state funding for the Erie region, ranked it No. 3 on its list. When the conference renewed its rankings of requests to the state, the research and economic development park rose to the top of 40 projects seeking state funding.

In May 1999, Pennsylvania State University President Graham Spanier outlined a statewide five-year \$705 million building plan for the multiple-campus university that included a \$34.5 million research and economic development center on Behrend's campus overlooking Wintergreen Gorge in Harborcreek Township.

University officials said they would seek \$30 million in state funding for the project, which would consist of a state-of-the-art center for research and instruction to expand Behrend's role in economic development in the region.

The center would house the School of Engineering and Engineering Technology, the School of Business, the northwestern regional office of the state's Ben Franklin Technology Center, the PennTAP technical assistance program and the Plastics Technology Deployment Center.

According to the plan, the new 180,000-square-foot building would house adult education and specialty classes for workers in business and industry. Officials said it would be built on a hill between the main campus and the new Knowledge Park development off Jordan Road.

University officials at the time said it would more than triple the space devoted to engineering studies, research and related work. For size comparison, Behrend officials noted that the four-building engineering complex that opened in the fall of 1996 contained a total of 55,000 square feet.

"This is a key component that will enable us to develop our research mission more fully," John Lilley, the provost of Behrend said at the time of the spring 1999 announcement.

Officially, the RED-C - the Behrend jargon for Research and Economic Development Center - represents phases 3 and 4 of Knowledge Park.

Word of this week's announcement began leaking out just before Christmas when Lilley sent out invitations to many people in Erie to the 9:30 a.m. event Thursday at Knowledge Park.

Edward "Ted" Junker, retired president of PNC Bank-Northwest and chairman of the Penn State Board of Trustees, confirmed that he will introduce the governor but said he couldn't comment beyond that. Also scheduled to attend is Paul C. "Hoop" Roche, president and CEO of Erie Plastics, a further signal that the announcement is of major significance to the plastics industry.

He, too, said he could not confirm the announcement but when asked if it would benefit the plastics industry, he said it would do so by making education in the field more accessible.

"Our growth here has been restrained by a lack of facilities and this will help alleviate that," he said.

Ed Blaguszewski, a Behrend spokesman, said Tuesday that the university would have no comment prior to Thursday's news conference.

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