

EcoComplex is Eco-Friendly

Catawba County's ongoing efforts to create an EcoComplex at and near the Blackburn Landfill in Vale have been recognized nationally by an organization dedicated to promoting innovative thinking in government.

The Alliance for Innovative, formerly known as the Innovation Groups, presented the 2007 Thomas Muehlenbeck Award for Excellence in Local Government to Catawba County as its conference on June 7 in Bellevue, Washington. Catawba County Director of Utilities and Engineering, Barry Edwards and Public Services Administrator, Jack Chandler, accepted the award.

The EcoComplex is designed to promote economic development and create new jobs in the green energy, green business, agricultural and environment sectors. It will accommodate research involving all aspects related to biologically derived energy recovery and use, as well as research of alternative fuels and minimization of green houses for environmental, agricultural and energy use.

The Muehlenbeck Award is given annually to one local government in the United States for outstanding achievement in innovation. It honors Thomas Muehlenbeck, who has served as the City Manger of Plano Texas since 1987 and was chair of The Innovation Groups Board of Directors' for ten years.

According to Jim Ingram, Director of Finance and Administration for the Alliance for Innovation, the award takes into consideration how successfully a program addressed an important dilemma of public service delivery; it's positive impact and benefit to a community or jurisdiction; a "quantum leap of creativity"; a government's commitment and support of bringing the innovation to life, service delivery improvements and efficiencies; organizational improvements because of the innovation; and tangible effectiveness and results.

"In short, the award recognizes a local government and its program that demonstrate a commitment to excellence and shows forward thinking about the challenges that not only face local governments today, but challenges that will impact the future," Ingram said.

The Catawba County EcoComplex is being designed to use the operational relationships of public and private partners for the benefit of the environment and the local economy.

Private companies have been recruited to co-locate their operations with those of the Blackburn Landfill. Waste products from those businesses will be converted into energy to operate the landfill, the partner businesses and a proposed sludge maintenance facility.

"Catawba County sees tremendous potential, both environmentally and economically, from our EcoComplex and we are very excited as we continue with its development," said Barry B. Edwards, Catawba County's Director of Utilities and Engineering, who is overseeing the EcoComplex. "We are delighted that Alliance For Innovation has recognized the special potential for our EcoComplex, as well as the efficiency and effectiveness of its design and the work of our partners. We are very pleased to receive the 2007 Thomas H. Muehlenbeck Award."

Some of the EcoComplex partners are already in place. The County and its eight municipalities have been partners for over ten years in the Regional Sludge Management

Facility and in the Blackburn Landfill and these partnerships will continue through the development and implementation of the EcoComplex. Gregory Wood Products has been in operation since August 2005 and has 93 employees working six days a week. This company is a producer of dimensional lumber and it buys 5000 to 6000 tons of logs each week, adding \$9 to \$10 million a year to the local economy. Pallet One is another business that is expected to open inside the EcoComplex later this year. It will take the wood waste produced by Gregory Wood Products and turn it into wood pallets used by a host of industries.

Catawba County is continuing negotiations with greenhouse companies interested in locating in the EcoComplex. Appalachian State University has received a grant for a biodiesel research facility that would be located in the EcoComplex and would use the electricity and heat created by the County's existing co-generation units, which use methane naturally produced in the landfill to generate electricity. The County and Appalachian State University are continuing to look for areas in which to broaden the research that is being performed at the EcoComplex, with special emphasis being placed on biologically derived alternative fuel sources.

The County is also currently reviewing Requests for Proposals from companies interested in constructing a bioenergy facility that would be located in the EcoComplex. This facility will convert the waste products of Gregory Wood Products, Pallet One and the landfill, (sawdust and other wood waste), to produce steam and heat. The steam and heat would then be used by Gregory Wood Products and Pallet One for drying kilns, by the County to produce more electricity and for the proposed sludge maintenance facility, and would be used by the greenhouse and Appalachian State's biodiesel research facility once they are located within the complex.

For more information on the Catawba County EcoComplex, you may call the Catawba County Department of Utilities & Engineering at (828) 465-8261.