

THE SPOKESMAN-REVIEW

Washington Education Business Idaho

2023 Election Center: See the latest headlines from the 2023 general election here

NEWS > SCI/TECH

Spokane tech hub one step closer to gaining federal funds to build aerospace manufacturing center

Oct. 23, 2023 | Updated Mon., Oct. 23, 2023 at 10:20 p.m.



The former Triumph Composite Systems Inc. factory in Airway Heights could house the construction of composite materials for the aerospace industry. (The Spokesman-Review) [Buy this photo](#)

--	--	--

By Tod Stephens
tods@spokesman.com
(509) 459-5581

Spokane took another step Monday toward an ambitious multimillion-dollar initiative to become a leading supplier of materials used in the aerospace industry – specifically, composites that could be designed and manufactured on the West Plains.

The federal government picked a group of regional businesses, local governments, tribes and Gonzaga University that have banded together to create a “Tech Hub” with their eyes on up to \$70 million in federal grant money.

This Inland NW Composites Consortium, which includes some 50 members, was among 31 other groups that were selected from a pool of almost 400 aspirants attempting to tap into federal funds.

The U.S. Economic Development Administration, which is leading the selection process, will now narrow the field down to a final five to 10 applicants that will receive money.

“The organizational, educational, civic, business and cultural resources of this area are unmatched,” Gonzaga University President Thayne McCulloh said in a statement. “This incredible group of partners and innovators is perfectly poised to create the future, and it begins right here in the Inland Northwest.”

The announcement comes with no financial implications but instead allows the consortium to apply for the second and final phase of the selection process.

If chosen in the final phase, the consortium would be granted between \$40 million and \$70 million.

The funds would be used to implement the American Aerospace Materials Manufacturing Center, which would specialize in manufacturing thermoplastic composites.

Because these materials are lighter and more fuel-efficient, they are becoming increasingly in demand as the aerospace industry strives for lower emissions.

But aircraft manufacturers often look to foreign suppliers to find these materials. The proposed facility could foster a better domestic supply chain for nearby companies such as Boeing Co. and Lockheed Martin Corp., and thus increase American competitiveness in the global market.

The project would occupy the former Triumph Composite Systems Inc. factory at 1514 Flint Road that was shuttered more than a year ago.

The 386,000-square-foot facility sits on 50 acres near the Spokane International Airport and is owned by Spokane-based Lakeside Companies.

The company also owns Advanced Thermoplastic Composites, an aviation and aerospace component manufacturing company in Spokane Valley.

“Lakeside is proud to be ... accelerating our domestic supply base and American manufacturing jobs in the Inland Northwest,” John J. Hemmingson, CEO of Lakeside Companies, said in a statement. “We have the talent, the resources, and the right partnerships to take this plan to the next step.”

The Tech Hub program was created as part of the CHIPS and Science Act of 2022, which authorizes \$10 billion to be invested into local economies to drive technological innovation and strengthen domestic manufacturing, a White House publication said.

As chair of the Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation, U.S. Senator Maria Cantwell was an early advocate for the bill.

Cantwell said the U.S. is home to revolutionary thought, but that doesn't always progress to innovation.

“The rest of the world is reading our publications and implementing our science,” Cantwell said. “We need to patent more. We need to translate discoveries from our universities into real U.S. manufacturing competitiveness.”

A mission of the Tech Hub is to foster technological innovation and grow companies in new areas, away from major cities, according to a U.S. Economic Development Administration publication. According to Cantwell, this is especially needed for the aviation industry.

“We're now in the second 100 years of aviation. The first 100 years, there was competition, but between only a couple of companies,” she said. “The next 100 years of aviation, there's going to be a lot of growth in different countries and different companies and we're going to have to follow those trends to stay competitive.”

Cantwell said the Inland Northwest Consortium has good chances at being awarded funds because the collaboration required for the Tech Hub application was happening in the region years prior to the program.

She said Gonzaga had a major role in creating partnerships in the region.

McCulloh said in an interview Monday that fostering regional partnerships is a responsibility of all higher education institutions.

“To contribute meaningfully to our regional economy, we want to provide a contemporary education that is going to prepare students to serve in their economic reality,” he said. “To do that, we engage in ongoing dialogue with regional industries, which we have been doing

for years.

This work has not only primed Gonzaga University to lead the Inland Northwest Consortium, but eased efforts to get local organizations to join the consortium.

“It wasn’t difficult,” he said. “Some organizations had questions to varying degrees, but for the vast majority, they understood what the region needs to grow and that the economic impact could be huge.”

McCulloh said the impressive list of consortium members makes the application for the American Aerospace Materials Manufacturing Center especially compelling.

“We’re perfectly positioned in our minds for what this program was designed to be,” he said.

Regarding the next phase’s application, McCulloh said the consortium has yet to receive criteria from the administration. The deadline to submit second-phase proposals is Feb. 29.

THE SPOKESMAN-REVIEW

Local journalism is essential.

Give directly to The Spokesman-Review's Northwest Passages community forums series -- which helps to offset the costs of several reporter and editor positions at the newspaper -- by using the easy options below. Gifts processed in this system are not tax deductible, but are predominately used to help meet the local financial requirements needed to receive national matching-grant funds.



Jesse Tinsley

Meet Jesse Tinsley. As a certified drone pilot, this veteran Spokesman-Review photographer often can be seen capturing beautiful aerial photographs of our region. Sometimes though, the job requires getting down with the dogs.