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Year in review: Top local stories of 2005

Energy center could mean great deal for the future of Carbon County

Over the past two years a lot of work and hope has been put into a project that many in the county openly wondered could ever happen. But in mid-December, an announcement that would be the corner stone for an educational institution that could changed the face of Carbon county was released. At that time the United States Department of Labor stated that a grant of $2.7 million would be given to the College of Eastern Utah to train laborers in multiple sectors of the energy industry.

The college had indicated several months ago that it had a desire to create an education facility to train workers in various sectors of the energy field.

"This is a wonderful opportunity for CEU and the surrounding communities," said Gov. Jon Huntsman. "This sort of boost is perfect for our state's energy industry and the corresponding economic development in the area."

The grant totaled $2,737,804 and had the backing of three key partners, including the Southeastern Utah Energy Producers Association, the Utah Department of Workforce Services and the Eastern Utah District of the Division of Rehabilitation Services.

Utah was one of six states to receive funding under the federal initiative.

"Utah's natural resources are plentiful and will play a vital role in meeting the United States' ever increasing demands for energy in the future," wrote Sen. Bob Bennett in a letter supporting the grant. "As of this time, however, there has been no investment of federal funds for the purpose of training individuals capable of assisting Utah in harnessing these resources."

In the months before some people had descried the concept as nothing more than a pipe dream but many industry experts and public officials realized the need for such a facility in the region.

"The growing demand for energy resources is creating new jobs in eastern Utah for workers who possess the right skill sets," said U.S. Labor Secretary of Labor Elaine Chao. "With this $2.7 million grant under President Bush's high growth job training initiative, the College of Eastern Utah will partner with the industry to provide training and certification programs so workers can acquire those skills and access these new career opportunities."

Courses that are to be taught at the facility will include safety, instrumentation and technical skills certifications with the capacity to train up to 2,100 people annually. Classes also will be offered to Hispanic and American Indian populations in their native languages.

"The training provided by the College of Eastern Utah and its partners will prepare workers with transferable skills, equipping them to compete for good jobs and promotion opportunities," said Emily Stover, assistant secretary of labor for employment and training. "The eastern Utah energy industry also will benefit from a pipeline of new workers to help address the challenge of a baby-boom workforce ready to retire."

Upon completion of the curriculum, participants will be offered additional training tailored to mining and power generation. Training will lead to a knowledge base that can be transferred across multiple energy industry sectors.

"We are trying to create a different approach to training in this area," pointed out Thomas. He explained that courses will be offered on a non-traditional schedule.

The CEU president explained that in the education field, curriculum is often manipulated and adjusted to fit into a 14 or 16 week schedule and the type of training that the college plans to offer will not be constrained by the time frame of the traditional semester system.

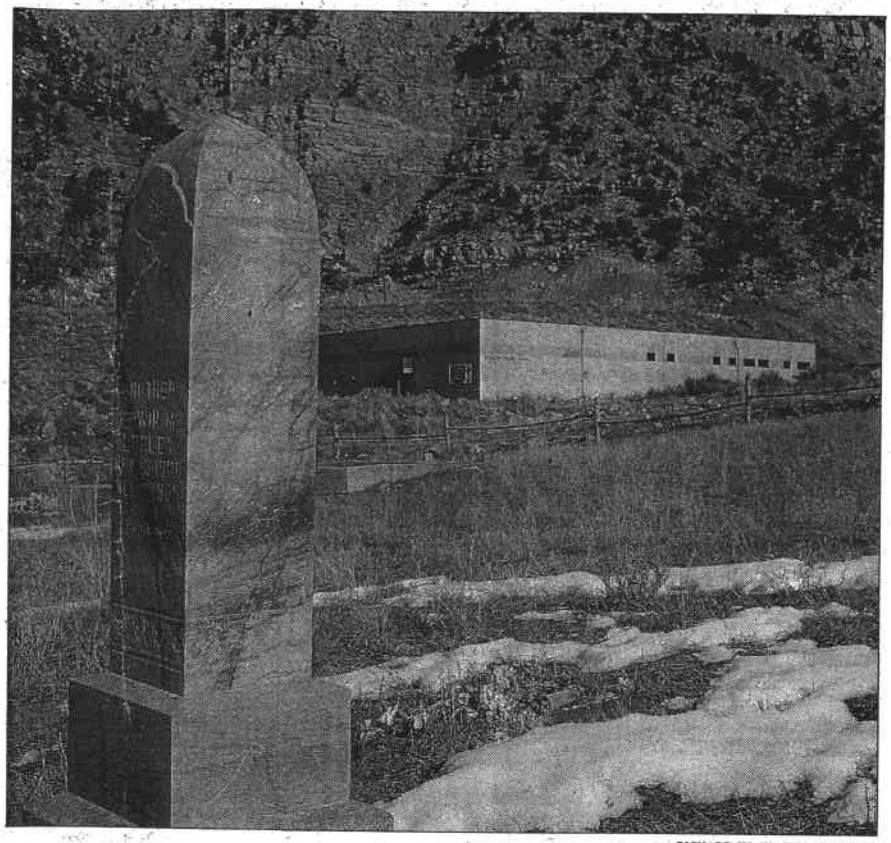
Over the past couple of years energy industry experts have raised concern regarding the need for more skilled workers in the industry. Specifically, experts warn that nearly half of the current energy workforce will retire in the next five to 10 years. Meanwhile many younger workers are unaware of the highly skilled, well-paying careers available.

Many people tend to consider energy jobs as dirty, unstable and low-skilled employment opportunities. However, despite the need for more workers in the industry, many training programs were scaled back or closed down due to a downturn in the industry in the late 1980s and early 1990s. And those training programs have not been revamped despite growth in the industry.

Further, with new technologies being implemented, employers are looking for workers who are more proficient in math, science and technology than in the past. As a result, experts, including officials within the U.S. Department of Labor are looking for creative solutions that will help experienced workers who are retiring to transfer skills and knowledge to a younger workforce as quickly as possible.

In order to provide the necessary training, CEU plans to provide classes at the main Price campus and satellite campuses located throughout eastern Utah. Hands-on training will be offered at the college's energy center, according to Thomas.

Additional training will be offered at the center's on-site mine and other employer-chosen work sites.



RICHARD SHAW - SUN ADVOCATE

Grave markers where miners from the 1920's Castle Gate mining disaster are buried stand in front of buildings that could be used to train miners in systems, work process and safety if the new energy center becomes a reality in the canyon. The new educational opportunity could be a boom to Carbon County.

"There are several pieces that are coming together that we have been working on for a number of months," said Thomas. One of the pieces of that puzzle, the physical location of the college's energy center, is still in the works and hopefully will be determined sometime early in 2006.

Thomas explained that the college is working with multiple donors and plans to purchase land from Plateau Mining Corporation located at the former Willow Creek coal production operation in Price Canyon. In October, Thomas and CEU officials approached the Utah Permanent Community Impact Fund Board in an effort to acquire temporary funding for the purchase of 300 acres and buildings housing state-of-the-art equipment that would be used for the training program. However, community impact board members were reluctant to provide funding for the proposed energy center for multiple reasons.

As a result, CEU is continuing to look to private donors and alternate sources of funding in order to purchase the property.