

\$1.2 million grant to help develop rising industry

It will be used for the field of advanced materials

By Monte Mitchell

JOURNAL REPORTER

Friday, December 15, 2006

WILKESBORO

A \$1.2 million grant from the Golden LEAF Foundation will help develop a center to train workers and boost the region's emerging advanced-materials industry, leaders from Ashe, Alleghany and Wilkes counties said during a luncheon yesterday at Wilkes Community College.

Leaders of the Northwest North Carolina Advanced Materials Cluster were formally presented the check, the largest given out by Golden LEAF in this grant cycle.

Officials are not sure exactly what form the center will take in terms of brick and mortar, but they expect a physical presence in all three counties.

"What we want to do is develop the education and training and see where that leads us," said Gordon Burns, the president of Wilkes Community College.

The community college and the three counties started the Advanced Materials Cluster in 2004, and they are trying to develop the area as a national hub for advanced materials, with a focus on reinforced plastics. Advanced materials include such things as high-strength nickel alloy or fiber-enforced polymers.

A handful of area industries use advanced materials, and the cluster is trying to build on that base to increase production and to spin off suppliers and other industries.

The Martin Marietta Composites plant in Sparta has made truck trailers and other items from long, continuous glass fibers that are woven like a carpet and covered in a plastic resin. Putting multiple layers of the fabrics together creates a material that can be as hard as steel but lighter than aluminum.

Grant Godwin, the vice president of Martin Marietta Composites, said he sees an opportunity to greatly increase the use of hybrid vehicles by using advanced materials that would lower the weight of the vehicles to improve fuel efficiency.

The Louisiana Pacific plant in Wilkes County uses advanced materials in composite-wood products for siding.

The plant employs about 400 people, with an average wage of \$17 an hour, said Jim Halsey, the company's director of human resources.

He said that local industry looks forward to what the new Advanced Materials Center can do.

"It is exciting to see this whole process of working together evolve," he said.

Starting next year, Wilkes Community College and the Advanced Materials Center will offer an

associate degree program to train workers for the advanced-materials industry.

John Hauser, the director of the cluster and the dean of the college's Industrial, Engineering and Customized Industry Training Division, said that the Golden LEAF grant comes at a time when the Advanced Materials Cluster is positioned to help transform the region's economy.

"The center is a real-world need for our region," he said.

The Golden LEAF Foundation is a nonprofit organization created in 1999 to get half of the proceeds from the state's master-settlement agreement with the U.S. tobacco industry to try to assist development efforts in tobacco-dependent communities.

- Monte Mitchell can be reached in Wilkesboro at 336-667-5691 or at mmitchell@wsjournal.com.

This story can be found at: <http://www.journalnow.com>

[Go Back](#)