

Tech trend

Advanced Technology & Manufacturing Center may reverse Fall River's ailing economic history

By MICHAEL W. FREEMAN
Herald News Staff Reporter

FALL RIVER — When a legislative committee wanted to hold a public hearing in southeastern Massachusetts last month, they knew exactly where to go.

A huge crowd turned out for the hearing before the Legislature's Revenue Enhancement Committee, for an opportunity to let lawmakers know what they think about how tax rates in Massachusetts should be set.

It helped that they had an ideal place to hold the meeting: the large conference room inside the Advanced Technology & Manufacturing Center, which offers a beautiful view of South Watuppa Pond.

The center officially opened in November amid great fanfare and even greater expectations. Acting Gov. Jane Swift was on hand, and noticed the superb view from the conference room of the South Watuppa.

"What an absolutely beautiful location," she said.

It's a project that had a lot of false starts — and still has a few semi-dark clouds lingering over it.

The center was born out of a tragedy. On Jan. 12, 1987, a catastrophic fire hit the Kerr Mill complex on Martine Street, reducing the historic building to rubble. It was an economic disaster for 946 workers employed in various manufacturing and retail enterprises on the property.



Evan Watson of Fall River conducts an experiment in the Advanced Technology & Manufacturing Center's environmental chemistry lab. Despite budget setbacks, the ATMC is now open for business. Its emphasis on high-tech is a change from Fall River's history of playing host to only textile production facilities or other blue-collar factories.

Herald News Photo by OMAR BRADLEY

Three major buildings were destroyed, including the No. 1, built in 1890 for the Kerr Thread Co.; No. 2, built in 1887 when the American Thread Co. acquired the complex; and No. 3, added by that company in 1907.

Almost immediately, city leaders

began looking for ways to redevelop the site, and eventually went into an agreement with the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth to build a research and development center there.

Thanks to legislation sponsored by state Rep. Robert Correia, D-Fall River,

and state Rep. Michael J. Rodrigues, D-Westport, the state agreed to finance the \$14 million center. It was built by the Massachusetts Development Finance Agency, the state's top economic development authority.

The center is expected to offer more

than just a good conference room. With scores of laboratories where students and faculty will find advances in the field of textiles and other forms of manufacturing, the center truly is unique.

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ATMC: Center helps diversify local economy

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An additional 200,000 square feet of property will be available for a SouthCoast Research and Technology Park that will include the Advanced Manufacturing & Technology center.

City leaders view the center as a great engine to help diversify the local economy.

The biggest short-term challenge for the center is money. In

1997, the Legislature authorized \$14 million in funding to build the center, but then-Gov. Paul Cellucci vetoed all but \$1 million of that. Instead, Cellucci authorized the remaining \$13 million in bonds.

While MassDevelopment financed the building, UMass Dartmouth will need to pay \$1 million a year in rent to help pay off those bonds.

UMass Dartmouth Chancellor Jean F. MacCormack had asked

the Legislature to provide \$1.7 million in funding this year, including \$1 million for the leasing agreement and the rest to hire personnel.

Due to the state's fiscal problems and a steep drop in tax revenues, the state budget included just \$1.1 million for the center.

The university has complained that this figure doesn't provide them with enough money to hire staff.

After negotiations with

Correia and Rodrigues, MassDevelopment agreed to put off two years' worth of rent bills on the center so the university will have extra money to operate the facility.

The plan is to defer the university's rental agreement to free up \$753,742 that would otherwise have gone to rent payments.

The decision is expected to prevent the center from experiencing any more problems this year, although the state is still

facing a severe budget shortfall, which ranges between \$2 billion and \$3 billion. Fiscal 2003 begins July 1, and it's not clear yet how much difficulty area lawmakers will face getting additional funding for the center.

Still, the fact that the building is now up and running is considered a significant achievement for the region.

When the building had its ribbon cutting in November, MassDevelopment President

Michael Hogan noted this significance.

"This is in fact a very exciting day for southeastern Massachusetts, and for those of us in state government who want to boost economic development," he said.

"This was not an easy site to work on, and was 14 years in the making."

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