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TOP STORY

Colyer signs bill to help Great Plains with development efforts

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Gov. Jeff Colyer signed into law Senate Bill 185 during a ceremony Wednesday attended by dozens at the Great Plains Industrial Park near Parsons.

The signing was a momentous occasion for the Great Plains Development Authority, as passage of the bill overcomes major legislative hurdles and paves the way for future development of the park.

"Continued support from the state helps us continue to fight our fights and keep plugging forward to make this park a place of pride for our city, our county, our region and our state," Great Plains board chair James McCarty said. "Great Plains Industrial Park has had a lot of success and has a bright future in Labette County and Southeast Kansas region."

Recently the Kansas Legislature approved House Bill 2230, McCarty said, which gives Great Plains the authority to offer 10-year property tax exemption on leased property.

"Great Plains is the only place in the state of Kansas that can offer this benefit. Since the passage of this important legislation, it led to a 10-year agreement with Parsons Fertilizer Inc. to lease nearly 50,000 square feet of space and create 75 new jobs once at full production," McCarty said. "In addition, construction will begin this week on a \$1 million project to replace 4 1/2 miles of main water lines" and complete a full water tower modification and enhancement.

"With passage of Senate Bill 185, this is another game-changer for our long-term development effort."

McCarty recognized the long-time commitment of the dedicated groups of individuals seeing the park through the closure process and on through its conversion from a former Army base to a place of economic development in the region. In addition, he said he wanted to recognize Great Plains CEO Daniel Mann.

"We knew Daniel was an unafraid, experienced leader that would drive this challenging redevelopment effort and it's his knowledge, determination and vision that bring us here today," McCarty said.

Until this new bill was signed into law Wednesday, Great Plains was not allowed to assume debt, creating difficulties for the authority in covering costs of infrastructure repair and improvements needed to draw in new businesses. The franchise fee will provide an immediate revenue stream to assist with capital improvements, redevelopment, management and marketing.

State Rep. Richard Proehl spoke to the Great Plains development work that has been ongoing since closure of the Kansas Army Ammunition Plant (2005).

"The people of Labette County stood up and said, 'Let's make this a positive thing. Let's not make it negative,' and that's what they've been striving for all these years."

The Office of Economic Adjustment helped fund that effort for more than a decade, but that funding has come to an end.

Proehl explained that SB 185 consists of two bills combined. One allows franchise fees of up to 6 percent to be added to utilities. The second part allows bonding authority for the Great Plains Development Authority to pay for infrastructure improvements.

"Folks, this is just a couple more tools in their tool box they can use and they need it," Proehl said. "The tool will be there when the time is right. Senator (Dan) Goddard and I are pleased we were able to have a small part on bringing this about and I wish the Great Plains Development Authority all the success in the world. We're here to support you."

Goddard said with great challenges and opportunities come great problems.

"Patrick O'Brien, the chief of the Office of Economic Adjustment, said in 2005 that the Kansas Army Ammunition Plant and the Great Plains Redevelopment Authority faced the greatest development challenge of any base that's ever been closed in our closure history, and that is very true," Goddard said. "This is a huge facility. It has tremendous potential, not only for Labette County and Parsons, but for the entire Southeast Kansas region. I think the tools that Rich mentioned that went into the tool box as a result of our legislation give the Great Plains Development Authority the opportunity to use those tools to attract and development business here at the park. Infrastructure is a tremendous challenge ahead for the authority. I think these tools will enable them to improve and put in new infrastructure in the future.

"Anything GPDA can do to increase employment, increase investment in the community is certainly welcome," Goddard said.

Colyer said he keeps telling people that Kansas is the heart of America.

"I want you to think about something, especially these kids here. We're standing in a building that over ... 80 years ago didn't exist. In 1941, 21,000 people put up this ammunition plant in the space of a year. Those were our grandparents, for some of you, your great-grandparents, and we're in the buildings that they built. I think we owe them applause," Colyer said.

On signing the bill and its future impacts, Colyer said, "This is where Kansas is coming alive."

He said the law will allow the installation and the operation of utilities, to update and modernize water sewer, gas, rail lines and telecommunications. The bill also allows for bonds to be issued to pay for the costs of developing the plant.

"We want to be competitive. Kansas is a competitive place and we are going to grow. In laymen's terms, let's look at it another way. This bill will help when working with business," Colyer said, explaining how the bill cuts through bureaucratic red tape and eliminates other challenges to attract new businesses.

"I want less government regulation and more control at the local level and that's exactly what this does," Colyer said.

He thanked all those who contributed to the idea and establishment and development of Great Plains and have worked to see its growth into the future.

"So what we're doing is a game-changer. This speeds up the development process. It gives Great Plains the ability to grow, to receive franchise taxes and to develop and come and talk to business, so as the fourth governor to come visit, I get to come down several more times to go to those ribbon cuttings with you. That's what I'm looking forward to.

"And here's the other thing. This is being done in a way it doesn't pass the burden on to the county or to the city, or to these kids. What this does, is in case of default, it takes the responsibility here. We cut through regulation, speed up development and decrease risk. All that being said, I am very, very honored to sign SB 185."