

Toland sees the potential of Great Plains Industrial Park

By Colleen Williamson cwilliamson@parsonssun.com

Aug 24, 2019



Great Plains Development Authority project manager Becky Dantic (left), Parsons City Manager Debbie Lamb, Parsons Economic Development Director Jim Zaleski and state Rep. Rich Proehl joined Department of Commerce Secretary David Toland and Sen. Dam Goddard on a tour of Great Plains Industrial Park Friday.

Kansas Secretary of Commerce David Toland stood in awe of the massive wood trusses spanning the ceiling inside the brick building that was once part of a small city built by the U.S. Army in Parsons.

The Kansas Army Ammunition Plant, constructed in 1940-1941, had its own water and electric plant, rail, fire station and hospital.

After the plant closed in 2005, the remaining assets were returned to the local development authority to help economic development in the region.

Toland learned that 98% of the environmental remediation has been completed at the plant, though a big portion remains to be released from the Resource Conservation and Recovery Act permit. It is anticipated that will occur by the end of the year, leaving only 200 acres in the permit.

"The only environmental remediation there is isolated ground water remediation they are watching," said Great Plains project manager Becky Dantic.

"When I worked for Mayor Williams in D.C., Walter Reed was BRACed in the same round as here. I wound up handling a lot of the mayor's work on getting that transfer made ... back to the district government. I went to conference down in Atlanta and met Ann Charles. It was really nice to run into all these folks from back home who were working on this very project," Toland said. "It's interesting 15 years later to be standing here and seeing all that clean up, that at the time seemed incredibly daunting, ... now it's done."

"It's exciting," Dantic said of the \$70 million in environmental cleanup that has been completed. "Every time one of those parcels is removed (from RCRA), it's an exciting step. It's the right path forward."

City of Parsons Economic Development Director/Labette County Tourism Director Jim Zaleski explained to Toland that unlike older buildings in downtown areas containing lead-based paint or asbestos, which escalates renovation costs, the buildings in Great Plains Industrial Park have been freed of such hazards under the Environmental Services Cooperative Agreement.

"These BRAC properties are notorious for being difficult. I would say, for whatever it's worth, the fact that it's been 15 years and the site is almost entirely cleaned up and it's ready to go, this is the point where the real opportunity begins. There's a lot of work that had to happen in order to get to this point, but I think Great Plains is actually poised to take off as a real regional force," Toland said.

From a marketing standpoint, Zaleski said he has been zeroing in on identifying needs of businesses, with energetics first, a secure perimeter second and access to rail third.

"If you don't need one of those three, we're not going to target you, because you can find land cheaper someplace else," Zaleski said.

Parsons is eyeing states that are being anti-ammunition governed, California, Oregon, Colorado, Connecticut, New York, letting munitions manufacturers know Great Plains would be perfect for their needs.

"There is every reason in the world for them to locate in a facility like this in a state like this," Toland said after seeing the resources available at the park.

Toland's Great Plains visit followed stops in Chanute, Ottawa and Pittsburg Thursday and preceded visits Friday to towns in Montgomery County.

"I'm spending the summer going to different regions of the state on essentially a listening tour to try to understand what are the needs in individual communities and how can the state of Kansas be a better partner in helping communities address those needs and capitalize on opportunities," Toland said. "I started my tours ... in northwest Kansas. ... I've made 41 official visits since May to different communities. I've been hearing a lot of interesting observations from people, some of which are consistent regardless of what region, and some of which are very different region to region."

Labor, the availability of talent, was a common thread in every region.

"At the end of the day, if you don't have the people, it's going to be a tremendous struggle to recruit business. They need to know they can hire the people they need to get the work done. I think where Southeast Kansas has a particular advantage is with our community colleges," Toland said, speaking to the five community colleges in the region and the two universities (Emporia and Pittsburg). Labette County and Parsons are also certified as Work Ready areas and high schools are graduating students having already taken Work Keys testing to show their skill level, showing employers an available workforce.

"There's been major improvements in the alignment of workforce services with employer needs and workforce services now falls under the Department of Commerce, and I'm really pleased that we're able to take care of both job seekers and employers in a coordinated fashion."

To better assist communities, Commerce is getting ready to announce the hiring of a firm that will lead the state through a planning process to develop a new economic blueprint or 10-year plan.

"One of the things I hope we get out of that is clarity around what our goals are and then we could have a good conversation about how we can achieve those goals. Some of that is what's the size of our war chest? What are the types of jobs we are trying to (incentivize) and at what wage levels and what regions? I think that is going to be a very good strength for us as we rebuild Department of Commerce," Toland said.

As well, he said, Commerce is going to partner with TEAM Kansas, a private economic development group, to do a series of familiarization tours, where Commerce brings site consultants to the state.

Site consultants are the people who make recommendations to businesses on where they should locate or expand. Site consultants come to Kansas all the time but typically are only in two or three metro areas.

“What we will do next year is have a series of site consultant visits with these FAM tours this fall, to all rural communities in each of the regions of the state. We’re going to do southcentral, then southwest, then southeast. That will be next year. We will bring those people to this region and show them the assets — let them get on the ground and see all the possibilities. It’s a very different experience than looking at a website or researching demographics. We believe if we can get them here to see the opportunity, then it creates a better opportunity for all of our community partners to land new business,” Toland said. “This is something the state did for years and we discontinued it. I think this is economic development 101, and it’s precisely the kind of thing Gov. Kelly has directed. She wants to make sure our rural communities aren’t left out. I’m very excited about what this will bring.”

Toland, originally from Iola, spent that last 11 years as an economic developer in Allen County. Prior to that he worked seven years in Washington, D.C., doing economic development, so he has been on both sides, metro and rural.

“I’ve lived and breathed the challenges of rural economic development the last 11 years, and so I hope I have both a head for what needs to be done and I also have a heart for it, because this is where I live,” Toland said. “I get you have to have carefully tailored approaches in each setting if you want to be successful. I think these FAM tours are going to be a big deal.”

Toland toured several other areas of Great Plains that are available for lease and viewed Red Bull’s small leased building and Progress Rail’s scrapping division from a distance.

Zaleski said Great Plains and Parsons could use assistance from the KDOC, from helping learn of available government contracts, to businesses that would seek to take advantage of the only industrial park in Kansas that has a secure perimeter.

“I need to know who needs that specialty stuff,” Zaleski said.

Toland said he will reach out to his connections across the U.S. in business recruitment to help Kansas' rural communities.

“There is a lot of opportunity in this region, Labette County in particular. I think if you've got the local leadership and the physical assets like this, and the third leg of the stool, which is the state of Kansas, needs to be a strong partner ... then the sky is the limit,” Toland said. “But people need to understand it takes a long time. This isn't an overnight flip a switch and you're going to see immediate prosperity. That is not how it goes.”