

Sturbridge grant to finance water extension project

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STURBRIDGE — The town received nearly \$793,000 in state economic development grants last week, most of it going to fund the extension of town water to the Sturbridge Technology Park on Picker Road.

According to the Town Administrator James Malloy, the funding will help address a problem that has prevented expansion at the park for years — the fact they are now on private wells.

“Any business in that technology park with more than 25 employees has to be considered a ‘public water supply,’ he said. As such, their wells need to meet strict requirements for setback from a road and

space around them that prevent companies from expanding, he said.

“The board of selectmen has identified economic development as a priority right now, and I think this is a great first step,”

Malloy said. “It’s great the state agreed with us and saw it as a need for our area.”

That part of the award, \$750,000, is called the Massachusetts Opportunity Relocation and Expansion grant. It was sparked by inquiries from Thomas Root, president of Optim, Inc.

Optim has been a park resident since 1994, when it was called Applied Fiber Optics. It makes endoscopes for medical



James J. Malloy

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and industrial uses.

Root said the company, which now has 46 employees, wants to expand and add 40 more jobs, but found that Conservation Commission storm water rules and state well requirements "collided with each other."

"The only thing left was to look somewhere else" or revisit discussions from 1994

that looked into extending town sewer and water to the area, he said. "... We like it here; we want to grow here and stay here."

Malloy noted the park got sewer via another state grant in 1996, but "at the time [water] wasn't a pressing issue. Now it is." Today, the water line ends at Hobbs Brook Shopping Center.

"For the other businesses that are there, I think [the water line] would have mini-

mal effect," Root said. "...But the remaining land should not have this limitation when we have water right down the street."

Malloy agreed, noting public water will make it a lot easier to develop the 10 acres-or-so that's still unoccupied. He said the project will probably break ground next spring.

The rest of the governor's grant, about \$43,000, will go to Photonis, Inc., a company

that makes mass spectrometers and similar equipment.

According to manufacturing engineer John Lake, the funds will enable the firm to train about 21 of its 51 workers in the principles of "lean manufacturing." Essentially, the training would make their workplace and process more efficient in ways that promote both safety and competitiveness, he said.

"It allows a company to realize some very, very real

cost savings by changing the way you do things," Lake said. "This is the kind of culture change that can be a very huge shift."

He said the company needs it primarily because Chinese firms have begun to make the same products, but are still five years behind Photonis.

"Our price is not going to be able to compete with them for long" without such changes, Lake said. "... It's

something management can't do itself. You need a complete buy-in from everybody."

The firm will start its 11 classes in August and run them though sometime next year. It's targeting one department now, but plans to expand the program to everyone in time.

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