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The Affiliate Leadership Council, which represents the 140-plus members of the high-tech community in North Central West Virginia, has written to the governor and House and Senate members to ask why the I-79 High Technology Park receives a quarter-million-dollar grant from the state, while the Regional Technology Park in Charleston receives millions as a line item. Sen. Roman Prezioso, chair of the state Senate Finance Committee, said the two parks are philosophically different, and that the Marion park is a line item in the budget.

‘Apples to oranges’?

Answers sought about I-79 Technology Park state funding

By Debra Minor Wilson
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FAIRMONT — The question: Is the state favoring the Regional Technology Park in South Charleston with millions of dollars a year, while Marion County’s I-79 Technology Park is getting the short shrift?

Or, is comparing the state-owned and run Regional Park to the Fairmont park “comparing apples to oranges”?

The I-79 Technology Park is being left out of much-needed state dollars in favor of a technology park in Charleston, say members of the Affiliate Leadership Council, which represents more than 140 members of the high-tech community in North Central West Virginia.

They say the Regional Technology Park in Charleston receives millions as a line item, while the Marion County park receives a quarter of a million from a grant.

ALC board member John Dahlia of Global Science & Technology Inc. said the group has sent letters to Gov. Earl Ray Tomblin and the state House and Senate, wanting to know why.

“We get about \$240,000 a year,” Dahlia said. “We’re very grateful to get any support from the state. The park here has been extraordinarily successful. It’s clearly in the growth mode, bringing billions of dollars into the state.

“The park in Charleston, frankly, you can’t compare. The money is used to just keep the lights on. To our knowledge, and I hope I’m wrong, they have an exorbitant amount of buildings not at code that need maintenance. But there’s no development.

“When you hear the state is investing that much money per year, you’d hope there would quickly be a huge development, almost a payoff, but that’s not materialized.

“We want an answer why this park in Charleston, which is clearly in the start-up mode, is receiving millions of state dollars, while the park in Fairmont gets a tiny fraction.

“This is clearly a success. We’re trying to understand the state’s decision making. All we want is an answer to this fundamental question.” The letter has another mission, Dahlia said: To highlight the successes brought about at the Marion County site.

The I-79 park has created thousands of high-tech jobs employing “high-tech, highly educated people” with an average salary of \$60,000.

The successes at the park should be recognized by the Legislature, Dahlia said.

“Our hope is to be funded at a tiny bit more so we can do more economic development to support existing companies and bring in more,” he said.

He realizes that because one park is state-owned and the other private, “it’s a different dynamic. We all get that. At the same time, we’ve created a success here. Money is raised and reinvested back into the state, and is used for the technology park in Charleston. It helps everybody. We’d like to see the state invest more into what we’re trying to do to grow even further.”

He said ALC isn’t looking for any specific dollar amount. Its budget hasn’t increased, even after a showcase event in March that highlighted the park’s “extraordinary successes.”

“We’ve put together an issue paper for every member of the House and Senate of what we would do with additional funding.”

Tenants at the Charleston park are either nonprofit or state-run, he said. “They’re part of the Higher Education Policy Commission. And they have a school similar to Pierpont.

“There is no private investment in that location. The proof is in the pudding. Here you can see what’s taking place here. It’s tangible. You can count the people working, see the development, see the massive satellite dishes. We’ve accomplished probably more than we’ve been expected to have.

“We’re hoping the state recognizes that and gives us additional funding to do even more.”

The park has had a “dramatic economic impact, without question” on the area, he said. “You can see the service industry thriving in the region.”

With additional funding, the group would implement a program to invest in start-up companies that are technology-driven with innovative ideas, create a high-tech campus for new businesses and create an Internet

career page for all West Virginia technology-related jobs, he said.

“We think the park in Charleston is a good thing, but at the same time, we want to be recognized here as well.”

From the top of Monongalia County to the bottom of Lewis, I-79’s High-Tech Corridor is home to NASA, FBI, NOAA, NIOSH, NETL, Lockheed Martin and a veritable “who’s who” in technology.

The West Virginia Regional Technology Park (Tech Park) in South Charleston is the newest research, education and technology campus on West Virginia’s higher education system. It was established in 1949 by the Dow Chemical-predecessor Union Carbide Corp. as the company’s primary research center.

Now operated by the West Virginia Higher Education Policy Commission, the Tech Park adds significant capacity to the state’s academic, research and economic development missions.

State Sen. Roman Prezioso, chairman of the Finance Committee, said the two parks are like “philosophically comparing apples to oranges.”

The Charleston park was procured during the (Joe) Manchin administration and was the old Dow Park, he said. A technology training park was put in to coordinate community college training there. It also centralizes state offices in the Kanawha area.

The state owns the building and is obligated to maintain it, he said. The \$3 million it receives from the state goes into maintenance and renovations.

“When you look at the amount of money that goes into that project as opposed to the \$250,000 for the I-79 park, it looks off-balance,” he said.

“But we don’t own the consortium. It was built with federal dollars and probably a lot of those federal dollars are drying up. So it may seem like we’re giving the advantage to the Kanawha Valley park compared to this.”

He added that the budgets of two parks similar to the Marion County site were cut.

“We’ve never cut the consortium’s budget,” Prezioso said.

“And they are on the line item budget. There is a \$250,000 line item with their name on it. Just like the park in Charleston.

“But to say we’re treating them unjustly, we have no obligation to them. We do have the obligation to maintain the facility in Charleston.

“They kept the delegation in the cold. When Congressman (Alan) Mollohan was providing revenues to keep it going, the state had no indication what was going on out there.

“We knew there were hightech companies, but we had no insight. We could not match what Mollohan could bring in. He was bringing in millions and millions, and we could not play that ball game.

“How many people are employed there? How many are domiciled in that building? What does it do for the economy of the area? These are legitimate questions, but I’m not going into a contest with it. I don’t want to be an adversary.”

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