Training a ‘green’ workforce
SCF, North Port explore providing worker education

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In a push one development leader predicts could make North Port “the Silicon Valley of renewable energy,” the city and State College of Florida are exploring a joint effort to provide workforce training in green energy technology.

The potential collaboration, aired publicly for the first time at an SCF trustees meeting Wednesday, would also include expanded small-business development efforts, and a showcase of sustainable energy technology and products on land near SCF’s existing Venice campus.

“This will put North Port on the map,” said Peter Bartolotta, board member of the community planning group Vision North Port, which predicted the training could attract students nationwide. “This, to me, could become the Silicon Valley of renewable energy, housed under the banner of a higher education institution such as the State College of Florida.”

The proposed energy technology training would take place in what is now the vacant North Port Park of Commerce, just off Interstate 75 along Toledo Blade Boulevard. SCF working in conjunction with the city’s existing Entrepreneur Academy, would offer courses in renewable energy and building energy technology. Those partaking of the “green” courses would be not only students pursuing associate and bachelor’s degrees through SCF, but engineers and construction workers seeking certifications.

Bartolotta also proposed establishing a business development center in the same location that would focus on attracting and mentoring new businesses. “Everybody hears about the new businesses that fail in their first three to five years, and a lot of that has to do with...”
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training,” Bartolotta said. “We’d like to give them skill sets and improve the opportunity for them to succeed.”

The other half of the collaboration, a showcase of green technology, would be built on land near SCF’s North Venice campus and feature classroom demonstration projects of environmentally friendly building, landscape and design techniques and products. The city would contribute by designating 15 acres, an as-yet-undeveloped swath of land from the surrounding West Villages area, to SCF for the college’s expansion.

Lars Halner, SCF president, emphasized to the board that Wednesday’s presentation was specifically to “get (the board) familiar with the concept,” and that additional details, such as a specific projected cost and benefit to SCF, would be presented down the road.

But he agreed with Bartolotta’s summary of the key potential advantages to SCF: retaining more land to accommodate the Venice campus’s explosive growth, an opportunity to have a strong presence nearer to I-75 where SCF would be more accessible, and the creation of “feeder programs” for SCF’s proposed new bachelor’s degree in energy technology.

Meanwhile, some North Port city commissioners say the potential collaboration promises to meet many of the city’s needs and position it as a leader in green technology.

“All the details in the details, but as far as what the plan is, it’s very exciting,” said David Garibaldi, commission chair. “We have so much potential in North Port — for expansion of facilities, for growth, and in terms of our median age (37). The sky’s the limit. It’s time for us to thrive.”

“The nation as a whole is aspiring toward this green technology aspect,” said Commissioner Mike Trumbell. “But the training that’s available for it, from what I understand, is very hit and miss. So it would be beneficial to any area to grasp ahold of this future. Could it be North Port that grasps ahold of that? Nothing is out of the realm of where this city can go.”

Bartolotta outlined to the SCF board an ambitious timeline that calls for a finalized budget by mid-January, and the start of workforce training classes, a reworked Entrepreneur Academy, the new Business Development Center, and the classroom demonstration project by March.

But numerous issues need clarification before the project can proceed. Trumbell, one of two North Port commissioners who last week voted against designating land for SCF — along with Vanessa Carusone — said he needs to see more specifics, and a formal commitment from the SCF board.

Bartolotta said discussions would be held with the state, Sarasota County, and the city of North Port for potential loans and grants. He also noted that Vision North Port surveys show widespread support among North Port citizens for tax increases to support economic development.

And Halner said the private owner of the North Port Park of Commerce already has agreed to provide SCF a low-cost deal for use of its facilities.

“The developer is wanting us there bad enough that he’s willing to cut us a deal,” he said.