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At FGCU, I-Hub will create green curriculum

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FGCU's plan to open a 1.2-million-square-foot renewable energy research and development park is just the latest sign of green innovation coming to Southwest Florida.

First Florida Biofuels, a private renewable energy company, opened in Naples last year. FL BioFuels LLC has plans to open Lee County's first biodiesel plant in Fort Myers.

Now, Lee County's largest university has plans to hire a professor of renewable energy and open a 538-acre park that will not only further the school's research capacity, but create local jobs.

FGCU announced plans to open the research park, called the Innovation Hub, during a Tuesday news conference.

The park, which will be on the south side of Southwest Florida International Airport, will be financed by a \$1 million gift from Bonita Springs resident John D. Backe.

"This is a terrific idea because this country has no choice but to go into renewable energy," said Sylvain Chevalier, who owns First Florida Biofuels. "It's an issue of national security. It's an issue of balance of trade and it's an issue for anyone thinking about sending money to OPEC or Hugo Chavez.

"Renewable energy is the future. And the bonus is we get a cleaner environment."
In addition to Backe's gift, FGCU will ask the state to match the funds for an additional \$750,000.

Richard Galvano, whose group is developing the I-Hub project, said construction will begin immediately and the park's doors should open in two years.

The I-Hub will be built for studying renewable energy, solar energy, alternative energy sources, biotechnology and green technology.

"Considering the growing importance of green and sustainability on a national and global scale, we feel the hub will attract attention to the area, and create a leadership role for Florida Gulf Coast University in the area of environmental sustainability," Backe said.

Backe's gift will establish the "Backe Chair in Renewable Energy Endowed Fund," which will attract a nationally renowned renewable energy professor to the school.

The professor will teach classes at the undergraduate and graduate levels, conduct research on the emerging field and support the efforts of the local economic development council to attract industry partners in renewable energy.

Of the I-Hub's 538 acres, 400 will remain viable wildlife habitat. A 50,000 square-foot state-of-the art building will be the nucleus of the I-Hub.

Galvano said the building will be able to create energy on site. It also will have a think tank area with iPod connections for students and a strategy hall for professors and students.

FGCU junior Keishla Negrón, who attended Tuesday's announcement, is excited for the project even though she likely won't be on campus when the I-Hub opens its doors.

“Future generations are going to enjoy this,” said Negrón, who’s majoring in environmental studies. “This is going to expand our knowledge of Southwest Florida and beyond.”

The I-Hub also will bring administration, lab technician and other jobs to Southwest Florida, Backe said. FGCU president Wilson Bradshaw wasn’t sure how many jobs the project would create because an economic study hasn’t been performed.

Backe and Galvano originally offered to sell the land for the project earlier this year to the Boston Red Sox for a new spring training baseball stadium, but their bid failed. Afterward, Backe believed the land and money would be best for “a serious research park.”

“While there’s a great deal of academic work going on around here, there was a need for a true professor of renewable energy,” Backe said. “To say we’re excited is an understatement. This brings tremendous possibilities.”
