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Toshiba jobs will add to city's energy wave

Nuclear-power unit will hire 194 and bolster the city's status as a growing home to energy companies.

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Charlotte's bid to expand its energy hub gained new credibility Tuesday as a nuclear-power unit of electronics giant Toshiba announced nearly 200 jobs averaging six-figure wages.

Toshiba joins a wave of power-plant design, engineering and construction firms that have located or expanded in Charlotte over the past two years. More than 30 new nuclear reactors are proposed nationwide, including six in the Carolinas.

Toshiba America Nuclear Energy Corp., a Virginia-based engineering and construction management firm that formed in January 2008, will initially work as the prime contractor on two reactors near Houston. But general counsel Richard DiSalvo called Charlotte "a gateway to the South," where many more new plants are expected to go up.

Toshiba said it will hire 194 employees over five years, mostly from within the region, to staff a national project management and engineering center opening in August. It expects to pay them an average of \$122,037 a year, compared to the Mecklenburg County average of \$49,400.

Economic development officials said landing high-paying energy jobs would fit well with the well-paid, but currently vulnerable, banking industry.

"It's a little bit similar to the financial services industry – you start getting some of the big players and the labor market for those skills gets more plentiful," said Kati Hynes, who helped recruit Toshiba as the Charlotte Chamber's economic development vice president. "That's a draw for them."

Energy's growing role in the local economy took a symbolic step in February, when Duke Energy announced that it would become the namesake tenant of a 48-story tower recently-acquired Wachovia is building uptown.

Local businesspeople have packed recent workshops on the potential for more energy jobs, including those that exploit the sun, wind and organic wastes. As energy-related firms grew, UNC Charlotte last year launched a new center to mint engineering graduates.

Toshiba-owned Westinghouse Electric's presence in Charlotte initially led the nuclear company here, DiSalvo said. Westinghouse provides fuel, plant design and technology to the nuclear industry and employs about 25 engineers in Charlotte.

But Toshiba also credited Charlotte's work force, supportive local government and quality of life.

Toshiba had also looked at Houston, Atlanta, Northern Virginia and Greenville, S.C., said Kenny McDonald, executive vice president of the Charlotte Regional Partnership. Company officials surveyed possible sites in Charlotte over the winter, McDonald said.

The partnership worked to show that the region would be hospitable for the several Japanese families expected to be relocated, and for the other employees Toshiba would recruit. "If we had a hurdle to overcome it was to prove we were a diverse and open place," McDonald said.

North Carolina awarded Toshiba a job-development grant worth \$4.9 million if the company hires the number of workers it estimated. The grants are awarded to new and expanding businesses and industries whose benefits exceed the state's costs in providing services.

State commerce secretary Keith Crisco, who made the jobs announcement in Charlotte, said several other grants are in the works for the Charlotte region.

Mecklenburg County offered Toshiba a business investment grant worth about \$47,000 after calculating the company's net economic benefit at \$2.4 million over 10 years.

"That's kind of a no-brainer," said Harold Cogdell, chairman of the county commissioners' economic development committee.

While many environmentalists remain opposed to nuclear power, it's increasingly touted as a clean alternative to coal-powered plants that are leading sources of the carbon dioxide linked to global warming. While rising construction costs for a new generation of plants is a concern, "I think it's viewed as something the world needs to do as a bridge to the future," DiSalvo said.

Jefferson George contributed.



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