

CHS BREAKS GROUND AT GLACIER RAIL PARK

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Mark Lalum, general manager of CHS Mountain West Co-op, stands with others who helped make the new ag campus a reality for a groundbreaking event on Thursday morning, June 21, in Kalispell. (Brenda Ahearn/Daily Inter Lake)

Soil softened from recent rain made the digging a little easier as officials used golden shovels on Thursday to officially break ground at the site where CHS Mountain West Co-op facilities will be built in Kalispell's new Glacier Rail Park.

Several dozen people gathered for the groundbreaking ceremony at the 40-acre rail park. The presentation was given on ground that will hold a 486,000-bushel grain storage facility.

In a speech before the groundbreaking, CHS Mountain West Co-op General Manager Mark Lalum said they are excited to be moving into the new rail park. The project is the culmination of a lot of effort and cooperation from a lot of different people, including farmers, he noted.

“You [farmers] were the real builders and creators of the city of Kalispell,” Lalum said. “You were the main cog in the creation of Kalispell and now you are the cog that will allow us to go onto the next step.”

Lalum and others who spoke as part of the event noted that Kalispell’s roots are as a rail town, so while the city’s ambitious decision to reroute the tracks from downtown to the new rail park hopefully will lead to economic revitalization of the downtown core area, seeing that chapter of the city’s history draw to a close left a complicated feeling.

“It’s bittersweet,” Lalum said.

Much of the rail was first laid in Kalispell in 1892, so it predates many of the area’s most noted historic landmarks. Lalum said when the tracks are torn up they plan to cut out segments with the “1892” date stamp and hand them out to celebrate the milestone.

CHS, also known as Cenex Harvest States, a Fortune 100 company based in Minnesota, will pull its current three businesses from central Kalispell and consolidate them on 10.9 acres, with an additional half-acre for a fueling site.

The agreement was facilitated by the Flathead County Economic Development Authority, which plans to buy the three central Kalispell properties CHS currently owns and utilize them as part of the deal.

At the event, Reynold Franklin, the chief executive officer of Stueve Construction, the company working on the 4,700-ton fertilizer plant portion of the project, said the company hopes to have the exterior of the buildings done by the end of the year and the interior done in the first few months of 2019. He said they should be able to open by March. The final project also will include office and retail space and a product warehouse.

CHS also has agreed to construct a new fueling station at the intersection of Montclair Drive, East Oregon Lane and Flathead Drive as part of the deal.

Also in attendance was Flathead County Commissioner Gary Krueger, who in May voted in favor of loaning the Flathead County Economic Development Authority \$8 million to help facilitate the transition. The majority of the loan is coming from funds the county had saved to construct a new jail.

“Those jobs created through what happens at this business park are jobs our kids can have,” Krueger said. “Jobs are the most important thing we can have here in the Flathead Valley.”

Kalispell Mayor Mark Johnson stressed how much work the project has taken to complete.

“This didn’t happen because of me,” Johnson said. “Nothing worthwhile is ever easy, and this project was not easy.”

CHS joins Northwest Drywall and Building Supply as the only businesses to commit to relocating to the new rail park so far. The location is appealing to businesses that depend heavily on loading and unloading freight from rail cars. The price of the CHS transition has been estimated at about \$14.2 million.

"We expect the new fertilizer plant to be up and running by next spring," Lalum said.

The crew of officials got to work immediately after the conclusion of Lalum's speech. First, the CHS board of directors lined up with the shovels and took the first scoop of dirt to the flash of cameras.

After that, farmers took their spots behind the shovels, followed by elected officials and then anyone else who didn't make the first three groups but still wanted to take part. The amount of dirt shoveled showed just how many people had their hands in getting this deal done and the construction project to the starting line.

"Those of you that know me, know that I'm kind of a history guy, and this is a big deal," Lalum said. "It was a very complex project."

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