

NEBRASKA Business & Industrial PROPERTIES

Twin Cities' half empty cup becomes full

Scottsbluff/Gering, Nebraska

Asking some residents in southwestern Nebraska about **Sykes Enterprises** and may open a can of worms. On the other hand, you may open a lively conversation about how an empty building and unfulfilled promises by the corporation turned into one man's vision for the future.

The communities of Scottsbluff/Gering, near the Wyoming and Colorado borders, felt the impact last December when Sykes Enterprises (an outsourcing call center that moved its operations to India and the Philippines) closed its doors after only three years and left more than 200 individuals unemployed during the Christmas holidays.

The local economic development group

for the area, **Twin Cities Development Association, Inc.**, immediately began a search for a new client to occupy the building, and the Workforce Development Office assisted the newly unemployed in locating new jobs.

For months the building sat vacant, a haunting reminder of empty promises made by Sykes Enterprises as they sought to acquire the land and building several years earlier as part of the incentives for locating the business in the community.

Outspoken members of the community



had openly expressed their frustration with the situation, but Twin Cities Development never wavered in its commitment to finding a way to utilize the building. RFP's were sent to prospective companies, and several

potential clients toured the building, but as winter turned into spring, very little progress had been made.

The Executive Director for Twin Cities Development, **Rawnda Pierce**, had only been employed in her position for five months when Sykes announced the poten-

tial closure of the facility. She had, however, worked in the community for the past several years at the City and County levels and had developed business relationships with many local entities. One of those entities was **Western Nebraska Community College (WNCC)**, which Pierce had attended as a student.

In recent years WNCC had expanded its educational & training capacity by opening a new facility known as the **Center for Business and Individual Training (CBIT)**. The CBIT provides advanced vocational education in cooperation with local businesses and industrial firms and trains students to fill specific jobs. Located in a former manufacturing facility adjacent to **Western Nebraska**

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Future Home of Western Nebraska Community College's
Center for Business and Individual Training

Adjacent to Western Nebraska Community College



Regional Airport just north of Scottsbluff, the CBIT had grown by leaps and bounds during the past few years, with more than 10,000 students completing training through available programs. **Dr. John Harms**, President of WNCC, had also recently expressed his desire for a newer, state-of-the-art facility that would allow more training programs for local businesses.

It didn't take long for Pierce and Harms to connect. The facility that formerly housed Sykes Enterprises is conveniently located right across the street from WNCC and is less than four years old. Pierce took her idea to Dr. Harms, who began formulating ways to accomplish his goals and assist the community with economic development at the same time.

Pierce began negotiations with Sykes Enterprises to purchase the building. It took several months for final negotiations to culminate with a \$2 million price tag for the property. WNCC then had **Ameritas Investment Corporation** of Omaha, Nebraska, their bonds' underwriter, offer tax-free bonds to local investors as a way to raise financing for the project.

By September, the college had sold \$3 million in bonds, allowing them to purchase the facility for \$2 million. The remaining funds will be used for necessary renovations to accommodate the center's training climate. A former call center, the building has 400 computer and telephone equipped work stations and is wired with 89 miles of cable suitable for the type of high-tech training offered by the CBIT. College officials believe the facility is "an ideal home for the CBIT program."

"We could never put in the type of facility that the Sykes building is going to give us," Dr. Harms says. "We've taken a negative and made it a positive for the community. It's right across the street, and the technology we need is (already) there." The bonds were offered to local investors, who purchased about \$1.8 million and "were sold in a matter of hours."

WNCC closed the deal on September 30 and is making plans to move into the 41,000 square foot facility by fall of 2004.

Future plans for the new CBIT include a 29,000 square foot addition that will house an auditorium, as well as high-bay and low-bay work stations for industrial classes, which will be financed through a \$5 million fundraising campaign. When the remodeling project is complete, the CBIT will be able to accommodate up to 800 students at once, compared to their present limit of 200.

From Pierce's perspective, the half empty cup and unpleasant taste left by Sykes Enterprises turned into a win-win situation for economic development, business and industry, and education. Further development of the CBIT will provide an ongoing opportunity to enhance the existing workforce and provide necessary updated skills.