

Eglin chooses firm to build 100-acre high-tech education facility

[MLADEN RUDMAN](#) Friday May 18th, 2007

EGLIN AFB - The Air Force has selected a contractor to build a high-tech business park adjacent to the University of Florida Research and Engineering Education Facility. Eglin Properties LLC, a joint venture between Dick Corp. and Hunt Development Group, will use private money to develop some 1.1 million square feet of office space on about 99 acres near the intersection of Lewis Turner Boulevard and North Poquito Road. The Air Force plans to lease the parcel to Eglin Properties for 50 years and collect a fee.

Negotiating the lease terms is the next step, said local officials. They hope the agreement will be signed no later than October. Eglin Properties has "a very aggressive (schedule) in terms of build-out," Brian Brown, a member of Eglin's Mission Enhancement Committee, said Friday. "The main thing it does is diversify us." Defense contractors are the likely tenants at the Emerald Coast Technology and Research Campus, but the developers want to attract a variety of enterprises.

The Economic Development Council of Okaloosa County helped broker the deal. Executive Director Larry Sassano said the EDC plans to market the technology campus globally to attract high-tech companies, startups or university programs. Although the lease hasn't been signed yet, Sassano stressed that the EDC is wasting no time wooing tenants. Representatives are already talking to medical-life sciences and information sciences firms.

Sassano spoke enthusiastically about the technology campus. "This is extremely important," he said. "We've been working on this for years. Along with bringing high-paying jobs to the area, the technology campus will buttress Eglin's standing as a premier munitions research, development, test and evaluation facility, said Sassano.

Eglin Properties imagines the technology campus as a self-sustaining workplace. Along with office space and infrastructure to support advanced research, there would be a child-care center, fitness facility, restaurant and small hotel.

Dick Corp. is based in Pittsburgh, Penn., and Hunt Development Group is based in El Paso, Texas. Eglin Properties portrayed its tentative lease with the Air Force as a \$250 million award. Norman Fornella, Dick's executive vice president, said that figure - which could change - was based on a cost estimate of developing the parcel northeast of the Poquito Bayou area.

He has no doubt there's a market for the type of space Eglin Properties plans to rent. "I think it'll help grow high-tech in the area," said Fornella. "This is an important project for us and we're happy to do it."

Daily News Staff Writer Mladen Rudman can be reached at 863-1111, Ext. 443.