

New firm joins EDC Innovation Center

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FORT WALTON BEACH — Dave Robau has big plans for his new energy consulting firm, but he won't be alone as the business gets off the ground.

National Energy, a new energy sustainability and consulting firm started by Robau and several other Air Force retirees, is the latest business to be accepted at the Okaloosa County Economic Development Council's Innovation Center. The center is a business incubator designed to help new firms survive and thrive in their first few years.

"These are great facilities. You have everything you would need to start up your company, and it helps you to do that in a way to keep your overhead cost low," said Robau, the CEO of National Energy. "A lot of the services they offer as an incubator — access to financial planners, business consultants, teaching you how to manage your books, how to successfully manage your company, a lot of the networking things — they not only give you office space for low rent, they also provide all of these services and put you in contact with people who can help you grow your business, which is great."

The EDC started its business incubator in 2009 at the W.E. Combs Campus on Lovejoy Road. The Innovation Center targets technology-based businesses and provides planning assistance from other EDC members, financial counseling and lower operating costs through reduced leases.

National Energy joins J&P Khamken Industries, a machining and fabrication company that was accepted into the Innovation Center last year.

"(National Energy is) excited about the opportunities we're going to help create for them," said Larry Sassano, the EDC's president.

The EDC is in discussions with a third company that develops energy-efficient construction materials about taking up the final office space in the incubator. Sassano said he hopes to meet with the company officials in the near future to see if they can reach an agreement.

Two companies, Government Support Jobs and Grey Aviation, graduated from the program last year and have opened new offices in Destin.

Robau said he believes the incubator can help other start-up businesses or those thinking about going to market.

"We're looking to grow pretty exponentially," Robau said. "Right now we have a staff of about six to eight. But (with) the services the incubator provides, we're looking to increase the forecast that we have and hopefully by next year we'll have a staff of about 20 or so. I think a lot of that is credited to the EDC's incubator because they really allow that access to help expand your business."