

Support growing for binational border research lab

By Karen Van Splawn
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SANTA TERESA — Support for a proposed binational laboratory that would focus on applied technology and straddle the U.S./Mexico border is growing.

Two officials with Sandia National Laboratories in Albuquerque said Thursday that Rotary Clubs International, the Cross Border Institute for Regional Development and the non-profit U.S.-Mexico Foundation for Science are interested in helping with the binational sustainable lab, which has been described as “an economic engine.”

The three organizations “believe in what we’re doing and what to do to help us develop the concept,” said Gary J. Jones, manager for partnership development at Sandia. “We’re interested in taking technology and turning it into business development.”

Jones and Vipin Gupta of Sandia’s advanced concepts group, spoke during a border pollution prevention conference held at the Santa Teresa Country Club.

Gupta said applied technology “is that which can be used by real people,” or those without technical backgrounds.

“It’s a tool or a product,” he added.

The proposed laboratory’s targeted areas for business development include border infrastructure issues such as water, agriculture, health care, information technology, communications, advanced manufacturing, work force development and energy, air and transportation.

Jones said the idea for a binational laboratory comes from Sandia’s vision “of helping the United States secure a peaceful and free world through technology, and finding high-impact solutions to emerging national or global problems.”

The concept of a binational lab was first discussed last March in Albuquerque, with a plan to locate the facility -- which, according to one model, resembles an ancient Mayan temple -- between Santa Teresa and San Jeronimo, Mexico.

Santa Teresa is home to several large industrial parks, while private Mexican investors are working on a planned community in San Jeronimo.

“We want (the binational laboratory) integrated in the community,” Jones said.

It would cost \$30 million to build the binational laboratory and \$25 million annually to run it, Gupta said.

“We envision the lab employing 200 to 250 people, half from the U.S. and half from Mexico,” he said. “We are looking at all sorts of funding -- public and private. We’re in partnership stage now. We have to achieve those first.”

Gupta said some risks in creating a binational laboratory are perceived inequality in the United States/Mexico relationship, a failure to gain government commitments, perceived competition with existing programs or laboratories and border community distrust.

Jones and Gupta also discussed two ongoing sustainable technology projects, including a public health software system that allows for quick storage of medical data and the development of better solar stills, which aid in purifying

water and are considered one example of applied technology.

“We can show people a tangible (example) of what a lab could do, if it were much larger,” Gupta said.

Gupta and Jones said governmental funding decisions are, in a sense based on politics.

The border conference also featured Bernardo Escudero, the director of a Mexican maquiladora group in Juarez.

Escudero went over the success of a maquiladora waste reduction program which, since 1994, has resulted in reductions of 80 million gallons of water, 96 million kilowatt hours of electricity, 10,000 tons of hazardous waste and 58,000 tons of non-hazardous waste.

“These projects have saved \$30 million in material and disposal costs,” Escudero said.