

New campus will add to West Valley's educational offerings



Srianthi Perera, The Republic | azcentral.com

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(Photo: Photo: Renderings provided by West-MEC)

A powerhouse group of educators and officials from the energy industry in the West Valley donned hard hats and moved shovelfuls of earth under a bright blue sky recently in Buckeye.

The occasion was the ceremonial groundbreaking for Western Maricopa Education Center's new Sustainable Energy and Industrial Technology Campus at Interstate 10 and Verrado Way.

The West-MEC Southwest Campus, to open early next year, will be a career and technical education school with an emphasis on the energy industry. Its laboratories will be outfitted with actual industry tools for hands-on training and simulations.

The campus will support high school juniors and seniors from West Valley high schools, as well as Estrella Mountain Community College classes and adult education programs.

The need, apparently, is very real.



SUMMARY: Western Maricopa Education Center (West-MEC) and Arizona Public Service hosted a groundbreaking celebration for the new West-MEC Southwest Campus that will have an emphasis on energy education. Other partners in the project are the City of Buckeye, Estrella Mountain Community College and Palo Verde Nuclear Generating Station. (Photo: Photo: Srianthi Perera)

Speaking at the ceremony, Arizona Public Service Chairman Don Brandt said the energy and electric utility industries are facing a shortage of workers.

Also, he said, citing the non-profit consortium Center for Energy Workforce Development, roughly half of the industry's skilled technician and engineering jobs will soon be vacant due to retirements.

"This is something that we look at throughout our organization: the simple fact of the baby boomers," Brandt said. "Within the next so many years, we'll be gone, and that's over half of our employees, and we have to be in a position to train them (the replacements), recruit them and get them up to speed to carry on."

Brandt also referred to the National Research Council's findings that often, students' educational training did not align with the industry standards, and that additional schooling also is increasingly unaffordable and inaccessible for prospective students.

The council's recommendation for addressing that, he said, are partnerships such as this between schools and employers to establish programs that will produce ready-to-work graduates.

For this project, West-MEC is partnering with the City of Buckeye, Estrella Mountain Community College and Palo Verde Nuclear Generating Station, along with APS.

West-MEC Superintendent Gregory J. Donovan said that each program offered will be aligned to industry standards.

"We see the value in developing a skilled, sustainable workforce that is well prepared for high-demand jobs," he said.

Buckeye Mayor Jackie Meck said it was "a historic day" for the city.

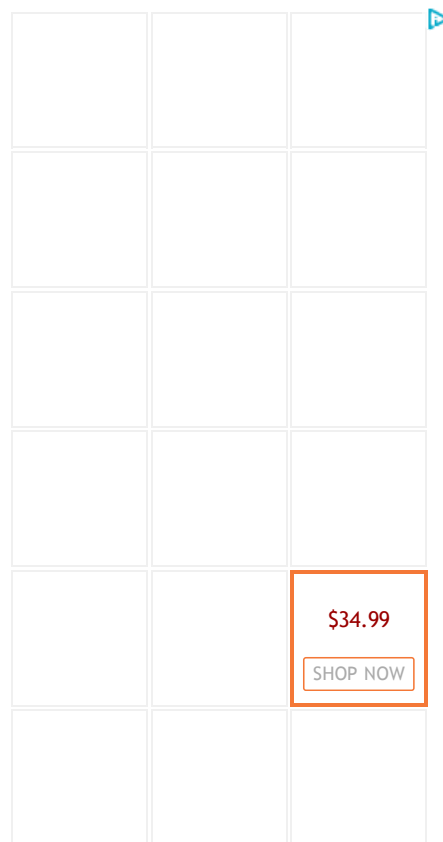
"For years, the city has focused on education, energy and technology. Today we see the fruits of that labor," he said.

The state-of-the-art campus is expected to draw students from across Arizona. Its first phase, scheduled to be completed by early next year, includes a 32,000-square-foot building for teaching and a 12,000-square-foot student services building.

The second phase, estimated to be completed in August 2016, will include an industrial technology building that will offer programs in carpentry, electrical and plumbing trades and medical assistance.

Once complete, the 20-acre campus also will offer 12-14 programs for about 650 students.

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