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URL: <http://www.abqjournal.com/biz/277296metro01-15-08.htm>

Tuesday, January 15, 2008

Solar Firm Heads to Mesa del Sol

By Andrew Webb*Copyright © 2008 Albuquerque Journal; Journal Staff Writer*

New Mexico pitched \$130 million in incentives to lure a 1,500-employee solar technology plant to Albuquerque, beating out more than a dozen other states, Mexico and Canada.

Schott Solar, a subsidiary of Mainz, Germany-based glass-making giant Schott AG, will initially employ 350 at the Albuquerque plant, which is expected to quadruple in size over time to become its U.S. flagship facility.

Gov. Bill Richardson, flanked by local and state officials, announced the agreement Monday morning, calling it a boost to American clean energy production and technology, and lauding the potential for hundreds of high-wage jobs.

"When we land companies like Schott, this is a home run for the state," he said.

Schott AG will break ground for the \$100 million, 200,000-square-foot plant next month at Mesa del Sol, a new development southeast of Downtown that is already home to a solar cell plant. Company officials said the new plant would be operational by 2009.

The company, which has annual sales of \$3 billion and employs 17,000 people in 41 countries, will initially hire 350 people to work on two products:

- Complete 300-watt solar panels, using solar cells made in Germany.
- Build solar thermal receivers—which are used to create steam with solar energy concentrated by parabolic mirrors. The steam is used to power turbine generators.

In coming years, the company will invest up to \$400 million to expand the plant, add about 100 jobs per year, and eventually expand to the production of solar cells—a process that uses materials and equipment similar to that used in the computer chip industry.

Albuquerque Mayor Martin Chávez told the Journal that the city and state have been working for months to land Schott.

"Today, we celebrate success," he said, calling the plans "consistent with my vision to have Albuquerque be the centerpiece for technology excellence on addressing energy independence and climate change."

Richardson said he sealed the deal with a handshake in a New Hampshire hotel about a month ago, during his recently ended presidential campaign.

He said the company chose New Mexico because of its existing base of skilled

workers and "renewable energy policies."

"This will help further the establishment of our state as the leading force behind the renewable energy revolution," Richardson said.

The governor will ask the Legislature for \$8 million in capital outlay funds this year for infrastructure, such as roads and utilities, at Schott's Mesa del Sol site, and \$4 million more in 2009.

Albuquerque will also contribute \$1 million in infrastructure funds, Chávez said.

Other incentives offered to the company— including job training funds, energy and high-wage job tax credits and industrial revenue bonds— total \$120 million, a spokesman for the Economic Development Department told the Journal.

New Mexico Secretary of Economic Development Fred Mondragón said the plant could provide jobs for high-tech workers recently laid off from Intel Corp.'s Rio Rancho plant and other local employers.

"This enables us to dodge the recession," he said.

Schott is a 120-year-old company whose primary business is glass and similar materials used for household appliances, optics, tubing, electronics and pharmaceutical packaging. Schott products are used in telescopes, flat-screen televisions and glass-ceramic-top stoves. The company expanded to the United States in the 1960s and began producing solar energy equipment in the 1970s.

Udo Ungeheuer, chairman of Schott's Management Board, said the company is dedicated to reducing the use of fossil fuels.

"Climate change is very real," he said. "We have to change our energy supply to clean renewable sources."

Most of Schott's solar business— both photovoltaic and solar thermal— is in Europe, but demand here is growing.

Schott Solar CEO Mark Finocchario said the plant would be the company's largest in the United States. It would also use solar and other renewable energy sources for some of its energy needs, he said.

"We're absolutely committed to becoming a good corporate citizen and employer of choice in New Mexico," Finocchario said.

Schott AG has a presence in about 10 U.S. states and employs about 2,500 in the United States. Schott Solar has another plant in Massachusetts.

Mesa del Sol is already home to a homegrown solar company, Advent Solar, which produces solar cells based on technology developed at Sandia National Laboratories.

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