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Wednesday, December 7, 2011

A recent photo of the canal area in downtown Holyoke suggests a tale of two cities. On one side of the canal is the "old Holyoke" - a stretch of 19th-century factory buildings that once housed flourishing textile and paper mills. At one time the city was reputedly the largest paper producer in the world.

On the opposite side of the canal is the "new Holyoke" - a building under construction that's the 21st-century equivalent of those once-thriving factories. When it's finished, the Massachusetts Green High Performance Computing Center will not deal in tangible goods like paper or cotton. Instead, it will deal in data. Five Massachusetts universities will use the center to perform the ultra-sophisticated computations that are integral to modern scientific research, including studies that will impact ordinary citizens - on climate change, perhaps, or cyber security, or health-care delivery.

Last week, Gov. Deval Patrick was in Holyoke for a "topping off" ceremony in which the final steel beam of the building's skeleton was put in place. The project, which got under way in August, is expected to be completed late next year.

Funding for the \$95 million center is coming from the institutions that will use it - Boston University, Harvard University, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Northeastern University and the University of Massachusetts Amherst - and from two corporations, Cisco and EMC. Public funding, both state and federal, is also involved.

The center will be able to handle a mind-boggling amount of data; one report cites a figure of a trillion bytes per day. Doing that requires vast amounts of energy.

And that's the prime reason that Holyoke was chosen for the center - it has cheap energy. Just as water power made Holyoke a 19th-century presence in industry, water power may make it a 21st-century presence in research.

Holyoke's municipally owned utility generates 60 percent of its electricity from hydropower, thanks to a dam in the Connecticut River. Commercial rates at Holyoke Gas and Electric are significantly lower than in other New England municipalities - between 14 and 52 percent less.

Holyoke had other things going for it, too, when the computing center was looking for a home. The city is just a few miles from interstates 90 and 91; it has access to state-of-the-art fiber-optic network lines; and it has plenty of cheap land.

The project is having an immediate economic impact, thanks to the construction work it has created. But once it's completed, it won't produce much of a blip, jobs-wise: 130 related

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AP FILE PHOTO

University of Massachusetts Amherst



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positions at the five universities, and just 13 positions at the center itself.

In an interview with the Boston Globe, Robert Nakosteen of the Isenberg School of Management at UMass cautioned that the project is no panacea for the Paper City. "This computing center is a positive thing for Holyoke, but it's a penny in the ocean," Nakosteen said. "If it's the start of anything, it could take a generation or two to happen."

A "generation or two" might be a discouraging prospect in some cities. Not in Holyoke. Despite its problems, the city has an unusual degree of civic pride and a keen sense of its own history, as anyone who has witnessed its epic St. Patrick's Parade each March can attest.

And even if other firms don't flock to Holyoke in the short term, the center is having an impact already: It's giving the city cachet as the home of one of the nation's small number of supercomputer centers.

For a city like Holyoke, with an illustrious past, that's good news. And in the long run, it just may mean that history will repeat itself.

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