

NEWS

Triumph Gulf Coast doles out nearly \$18 million ahead of the holiday season

Tom McLaughlin Northwest Florida Daily News

Published 3:21 p.m. ET Dec. 18, 2020

NICEVILLE — Perhaps it was holiday spirit, or maybe just looking to end a bad year on a good note.

Something sure had the Triumph Gulf Coast Board in a giving mood Thursday, as its membership voted to hand out nearly \$18 million in new grant awards.

Four grants were provided or agreed to in principle that will help fund projects in Escambia, Santa Rosa, Bay and Walton counties.

"Each of these programs will bring either or both new high-paying jobs and certified workforce training," a news release from Triumph said.

More: DON GAETZ: Can the Gulf Coast triumph? Yes

Santa Rosa County

The largest actual grant award — \$6 million — went to the Santa Rosa County Board of County Commissioners for infrastructure improvements at Santa Rosa Industrial Park East.

Triumph dollars, secured from BP in a legal settlement following the Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill, have been set aside to stimulate economic development in eight

Northwest Florida counties most significantly impacted by the spill.

The funds have greatly benefited Santa Rosa County. The grant approved Thursday is the third the county has received from Triumph to use to develop three industrial parks, all of which have recruited business to the region, said Erica Grancagnola, associate director of Santa Rosa Economic Development.

More: Early preparation key to economic development, experts tell Gulf Power symposium audience

"Our projects couldn't have moved forward without their support," Grancagnola said.

The 112-acre Santa Rosa Industrial Park East caters to heavy manufacturing companies and presently is working with three companies, including one that plans to occupy 40 acres and invest \$20 million, Grancagnola said. The other two companies will occupy a total of 8 acres, invest at least \$1 million each and bring 70 jobs to the county.

Grancagnola said the \$6 million grant approved Thursday will be used to build a road that essentially bisects the industrial park property, install utility hookups and dig a pond to hold stormwater runoff.

More: Triumph awards \$7 million grant to NWFSC

Bay County

Board members voted unanimously to provide a grant award of \$1,737,500 to AMIKids Panama City Marine Institute Stem and Business Entrepreneurship Labs in Bay County.

The Marine Institute is a non-profit originally created for at risk students, but it has expanded its reach over the course of its 40 years in existence, said Executive Director Ron Boyce.

The \$1.7 million from Triumph will be matched by the Marine Institute, according to Boyce, and be used to pay for vocational STEMM certification programs in aerospace technology (specifically unmanned vehicles, or drones), construction, to include programs in such fields as carpentry and masonry, and underwater robotics.

Underwater robotics is a new field of study at the Marine Institute and was recommended as a possible course by the Triumph Gulf Coast board, Boyce said.

The board also voted to grant a six month extension for completion of a \$20 million Panama City Industrial Complex project. The grant was originally provided to Eastern Shipbuilding to help the company fund a manufacturing project of Coast Guard patrol cutters.

The extension will allow the grantees six months to make up for construction work time lost in the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic, staff members told the board.

Walton County

The board also approved a term sheet for \$3,846,000 that will go to the Walton County School District for information technology and health care certification programs.

When a final grant is approved, funds will go towards providing career technical training to high school age students in IT fields and in health care professions such as nursing, nursing assistance and phlebotomy, according to Triumph Board Chairman Don Gaetz.

More: Education chancellor highlights workforce training in visit to Okaloosa Technical College

Based on a staff recommendation, Gaetz urged the School District to seek an interlocal agreement with Northwest Florida State College to create a means by

which students working toward industry certification in a selected field can receive college credits while pursuing certification.

"That way we can assure the courses that are taught meet college level standards as well as industry training standards," he said.

Triumph Gulf Coast has been "a very strong supporter" of career technical training at the high school and college level, having funded more than 20 such projects over the eight counties it works with, Gaetz said.

Escambia County

The board also voted to direct its staff to begin negotiations that should lead to a grant for \$6,078,795 to be given to the Institute for Human and Machine Cognition in Escambia County.

The grant would represent about 20% of an overall \$31 million project at the institute's Center for Human Healthspan Resilience and Performance.

IHMC is well-known for two distinct fields of research, humanoid robotics and artificial intelligence, according to its grant request.

"The envisioned new center, focused on human healthspan, resilience and performance, will establish a powerful, one-of-a-kind capstone for research and development in Northwest Florida – thus having a transformational regional impact," the grant paperwork said.

The work done will complement the institute's current NASA and DoD-funded research in this area, the paperwork said. IHMC will utilize the most modern equipment, technology and tools to conduct state of the art research in the field of human performance optimization.

Triumph board members also agreed Thursday to the withdrawal of a grant application put forward by the University of West Florida. The board and the

university had worked together for about a year to find a way to fund a grant in the area of cybersecurity, Gaetz said.

"The hope was to provide about \$11 million to UWF for the university to use to develop expanded cybersecurity training," Gaetz said.

Cybersecurity training is crucial at this moment in history and Northwest Florida is a major player in the field, he said.

"We want to fund a major cybersecurity project in this area," Gaetz said. "But the university could not seem to put together a plan that would work."

UWF officials were seeking about \$3 million more than the grant amount to cover indirect costs, Gaetz said. Triumph has historically rejected doling out money to pay for such costs.

Since Triumph Gulf Coast received the initial payment from the Deepwater Horizon BP Oil Spill Settlement with the state of Florida it has committed to 44 grant awards for public infrastructure improvements, workforce development education and marketing/promotion of the diversification of the regional economy, the news release sent out following Thursday's meeting said.

The awards total more than \$264 million in direct funding to each of the eight disproportionately impacted counties, the release said.