

Oak Ridge civic leaders hope conference sparks turnaround

By Frank Munger

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OAK RIDGE — Since the World War II work on the first atomic bombs, Oak Ridge has been the mother of jobs for East Tennessee.

The father, of course, was Uncle Sam, who provided a seemingly unending stream of federal dollars. Workers at the Oak Ridge nuclear research and production facilities earned some of the region's premium wages and salaries, and the trickle-down benefits included good schools and strong support for cultural life.

In the 1990s, however, federal downsizing has become a buzz word and a fact of life in Oak Ridge. Concerned leaders are looking for a difference, something to change the trend.

Will the Oak Ridge Summit on science and technology Thursday and Friday be a major turning point? Organizers believe so. At the least, they hope it will be the start of something good for Oak Ridge and the region.

"In this climate it would be a stretch to say the summit might increase federal employment opportunities in the Oak Ridge area, but I sincerely think the summit could lead to an increase of employment in the private sector. That certainly would be a great expectation," said Rep. Zach Wamp, the first-term Republican congressman who came up with the summit idea and promoted it tirelessly.

The two-day event will bring together elected officials — including Tennessee Gov. Don Sundquist, Sens. Fred Thompson and Bill Frist and a

roomful of Wamp's congressional colleagues — and match them with successful figures in science and technology. The hope, of course, is that discussions will spawn a political mandate that prizes science as a fuel for the economy and recognizes East Tennessee as a fertile staging ground for the conversion of technology to jobs.

“Our economic development future depends more and more on people becoming aware of Oak Ridge and our unique circumstances.”

Tom Rogers

circumstances,” said Tom Rogers, president of the Oak Ridge Chamber of Commerce.

“I think the long-term intent of the summit is jobs. The short-term objective is additional familiarity. We've got a whole new set of elected officials who represent us in Nashville and Washington. We need to tell them more about Oak Ridge and our capabilities. So that's the first mission.”

Wamp stresses broader themes, such as tech-

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nology transfer, regional cooperation and partnerships that include companies in his hometown of Chattanooga.

He likes to use Chattanooga's leadership in electric-powered vehicles as an example, noting that technologies developed at Oak Ridge National Laboratory are finding real-life importance 100 miles away. The demand for emission-free buses currently exceeds the capabilities of Chattanooga manufacturers, and more growth is expected, the congress-

man said.

A few months ago Wamp told supporters that he expected there to be more — and better — jobs in Oak Ridge five years from now. He still stands by that statement, saying that growth among technology-based companies such as Scientific Ecology Group, Manufacturing Sciences and M4 Environmental “will more than offset any reduction in force at the federal level.”

Rogers said he agrees with Wamp's assessment, adding that it will require a fundamental shift in the job market with less emphasis on the federal government.

A key to this strategy is reusing some of the government facil-

ities no longer needed by the Department of Energy, such as parts of the K-25 plant, which formerly housed a uranium-enrichment operation on hundreds of acres.

“We're already seeing evidence that private companies want to lease facilities out there,” Roger said. “We think it's a gold mine . . . and it looks like the Department of Energy is finally ready to cooperate.”

Another important development will be the acquisition of land from DOE for a large industrial park, Rogers said. Discussions with the federal agency are underway, although there is no formal proposal at this point, he said.