

BECKER — Change is already afoot in the Becker Industrial Park.

Hancock Street is torn up for reconstruction and crews are at work on the new Northern Metal Recycling facility near U.S. Highway 10.

Becker officials and lawmakers from the area want state taxpayers to help fund more infrastructure development there. It would pave the way for a Google data center and other businesses to replace the jobs and tax base lost with the impending closure of Xcel Energy's Sherco coal units.

Those officials want \$24.7 million in state bonding to help with sewer and water infrastructure in the industrial park.

The House Capital Investment Committee met with Becker city and Sherburne County leaders in early September with Xcel's plant as a backdrop, including two massive mounds of coal. The Senate bonding tour stopped in Becker on Tuesday.

Xcel is smart to partner with the city of Becker, because Becker can request state bonding money as cities often do, said King Banaian, St. Cloud State University economics professor and dean of the School of Public Affairs.

Plus, Becker and Xcel have a unique case to make, Banaian said. The state wants energy companies to phase out coal, so Becker can ask the state to help ease that transition.

Right now Xcel Energy contributes about 77% of the city's taxes and employs 300.

"You look at that plant; it's really large. That too is tax base and jobs," said Becker City Administrator Greg Pruszinske.

Half those jobs will be gone when the second coal unit shuts down by 2026. Xcel proposed this summer to close its third and final coal unit at Sherco by 2030.

"I think we have a really good strategy on how to transition," said Becker Mayor Tracy Bertram.

Within that strategy, the state funding is "extremely important," Bertram said. "This is what will make it go."

Google's interest in Becker is also a keystone in redevelopment plans. Some officials have called the proposed data center a "catalyst."

### **What's up with Google?**

Becker moves closer to finalizing the Google project "every day," Pruszinske said.

Once the city has funding for water and sewer, Pruszinske expects construction to take one to two years, depending on the design.

But when Banaian first got word that Google was in talks to buy about 300 acres from Xcel, he thought, "Google in Becker, really?"

On second thought, the proposal began to make sense, Banaian said.

Data centers need a reliable power, which Xcel can provide through existing infrastructure, including its Monticello nuclear power plant and a natural gas plant proposed for the Becker site. Data centers also need mechanisms to stay cool.

Google plans to use renewable energy for the data center, specifically wind power from the Dakotas, Bertram said.

The Becker Industrial Park has a lot of amenities to offer businesses, including access to rail, Interstate 94, Highway 10 and access to ground and surface water for cooling purposes, Pruszinske said.

"We're positioned well for a lot of business growth," he said.

"We receive inquiries from businesses wanting to locate in Becker weekly," Pruszinske added in an email. "We're also working with existing businesses in Becker that want to expand their operations."

And if Google comes, other businesses will follow, said Rep. Shane Mekeland, R-Clear Lake. "The infrastructure is needed before anyone is going to dig."

The data center would cost \$600 million and increase state GDP an estimated \$309 million, according to a fact sheet on the Becker business park.

The project could bring 2,300 local construction jobs, although those likely wouldn't be filled with local workers, because there aren't enough construction workers, Mekeland said.

The data center would employ 50 with "professional-wage, permanent jobs," according to the fact sheet.

It's not clear which other businesses would follow Google to Becker. Perhaps others that require reliable power and quality fiber for internet access, Banaian said.

Mekeland and Sen. Andrew Mathews, R-Milaca, proposed \$20.1 million in funding for business park infrastructure earlier this year, but it didn't get approval.

"We were this close to getting it passed last session," Mathews said, holding his fingers an inch apart. "I think we've got a really good shot at getting it passed this session."

Another proposal called the Community Energy Transition Grant Program that would provide planning and economic development funds for cities facing plant closures didn't pass in the 2019 session either.

Mekeland and Mathews are pitching the infrastructure funding again — now \$24.7 million with inflation. It has to stand out among other bonding proposals, as lawmakers will determine a bonding package in the 2020 session.

After Becker, senators visited Itasca Community College, Cohasset City Hall and the Chisholm Public Safety Building on Tuesday's bonding tour. The week prior House members visited Little Falls, Maple Grove, Rogers as well as Becker.

Bertram said she's hopeful, but not confident, that the state will come through with the money for her city's project.

Pruszinske said Becker leaders accepted the challenge of changing times.

"We want to continue to be a viable community," Pruszinske told House lawmakers. "We're asking for a partnership."