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Bill aims to boost businesses

*By Nathaniel Shuda
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A comprehensive job creation package drafted by two central Wisconsin legislators would provide a collective \$2 million in grants to businesses that reopen shuttered manufacturing plants.

State Sen. Julie Lassa, D-Stevens Point, who co-authored the bill with Sen. Pat Kreitlow, D-Chippewa Falls, said the provision would benefit any company that decides to open a previously closed facility for green energy manufacturing or production.

"It would apply to the Domtar (paper) mill in Port Edwards or other factories in the area that have had to cut back and now have unused space," Lassa said.

The Montreal-based papermaker closed the mill June 27, 2008, eliminating 501 local jobs.

Company officials had been silent about any future plans they might have for the facility. However, they recently have become more active in discussions about its potential uses, village officials said.

Lassa and Kreitlow, who represents the Wood County town of Lincoln, announced their Wisconsin Connecting Opportunity, Research and Entrepreneurship, or C.O.R.E., Jobs Act on Monday in Middleton. They are circulating the draft for co-sponsorship through noon Friday, Lassa said.

Other provisions of the bill, most of which require a dollar-for-dollar match, include a \$3 million increase for job creation tax credits in 2010 and a \$11.5 million increase for 2011, a loan program for new small-business owners and funding for research projects between businesses and post-secondary schools across the state.

"We have several collaborations with companies in the immediate area and regionally," said Eric Singaas, an associate professor of biology at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point.

Singaas and Don Guay, an assistant professor of paper science, are working with six of the university's many undergraduate student researchers to develop processes to turn wood pulp into biofuel.

"We need a way to support the industries we have and find a way for them to grow; that growth needs to be in a way that's environmentally friendly," Singaas said. Increased support to these types of projects also provides the university more opportunities to let students get in on the research, he said.

The package also includes an additional \$1 million for the Wisconsin Development Fund, used to attract and retain businesses, and \$2 million in tax incentives for businesses that pay university or technical college tuition for low-income employees.

Many of the ideas for the provisions came directly from municipal officials and business leaders in central Wisconsin, Lassa said.

Some of those ideas include a statewide computer system to provide economic modeling data to regional economic development agencies and a statewide ombudsman between businesses and state officials to assist in the permitting and approval processes.