



RangeView

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A Healthy Community

BlueCross BlueShield
plans Iron Range facilities

Sometimes, it's great to have The Blues.

Now more than ever, economic developers see diversification as the key to keeping northeastern Minnesota communities healthy and vibrant. The recent addition of Blue-Cross BlueShield to the region's employer base is proof that they are succeeding.

In January BCBS hired and began training its first class of 31 employees who went on to staff the first of two new Northeastern Minnesota Transactions Processing Units (TPU). Another 30 employees began training in February. In all, 165 claims examiners will be hired on the Iron Range to staff facilities in Virginia and Aurora. In all, three managers, 11 supervisors and five trainers will also be brought on board.

The corporate giant's expansion to the region was met with resound-

ing approval from everyone involved.

"I'm excited to be here," said Annette Geroy, director of the Northeastern Minnesota TPU. "I've been impressed with both the quali-

"Everything has come together smoothly, and we are on track in terms of training, construction and hiring."

**- Annette Geroy,
Director of the
Northeastern Minnesota TPU**

ty of the job applicant pool and the support we've received from communities. Everything has come together smoothly, and we are on track in terms of training, construc-

tion and hiring."

Iron Range residents are equally pleased with BCBS' presence.

When the company announced it would locate a TPU in northeastern Minnesota, more than 1,000 residents inquired about job availability. Helping conduct the first 300 interviews, Geroy said fully half of the applicants possessed many of the qualities desired by BCBS.

Of those vying for positions, not all had fallen on hard times or were unemployed as a result of the steel industry slump and general recession. In fact, most were employed. Some, like Lynn Kohlhase of Virginia, a former medical lab technologist, decided to return to the workforce to increase the family income and medical benefits. Others, like

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Mesaba Energy Project: Powerful Stuff

The Iron Range economy could soon be re-energized, if plans for a new power plant ignite. Spearheading the Mesaba Energy Project are



IGCC with Shell Coal Gasification.

turbine capacity will be sited in wind resource areas throughout Minnesota. In December 2001, the Iron Range Resources and Rehabilitation Agency (IRRR) approved \$1.5 million in funding, a site, and other project support for the development of the project. It is expected that the project will create approximately 1,000 direct, secure, long-term jobs for the workers of the Iron Range and will attract \$2 to \$3 billion in direct investment to the region. "This project will transform the economic future of the Iron Range," said John Swift, IRRR Commissioner, "and it will make a real difference in the lives of our citizens."

Micheletti, a native of Hibbing, Minn., stated that "the Mesaba Energy Project helps to avert the electricity shortfall that is projected to begin in the region in 2007 by adding hedged, low-cost electric generating capacity to the mix in Minnesota that will benefit citizens for decades to come."

"The project will clean up the air in Minnesota by deploying state-of-the-art, clean coal technology

that converts coal to a synthetic gas that will fuel the plant," said Jorgenson. "This will result in emissions that are one-tenth those of a new conventional coal plant using best available technology, and a fraction of the emissions of existing plants currently operating in Minnesota."

In early January, Excelsior Energy held public meetings in Aurora, Virginia, and Hibbing to present the project to local citizens and answer any questions. Micheletti stressed that legislative support of the project is critical and urged citizens to help spark such support by contacting their legislators. He said that Excelsior Energy will be submitting a bill to the Legislature asking it to streamline the regulatory process, provide rights of way for transmission lines, and provide tax exemptions. The company does not plan to seek state funding to finance the project.

If the project proceeds as hoped, the company would break ground this spring and open in 2007. ■