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ALERT FEATURED TOP STORY

SALUTE TO LABOR

Pioneering nuclear power: Framatome and BWXT

Rachael Smith

Sep 3, 2023



BWX Technologies employees use a variety of equipment, such as this vacuum furnace, to test components at its BV Campbell County.

BWXT, Provided

Rachael Smith

The Lynchburg area is home to the leading nuclear technology cluster in the U.S., thanks to the more than 70-year history of powerhouse firms BWX Technologies and Framatome.

Lynchburg's nuclear workforce is 8% above the national average and the region's nuclear industry cluster is 34% larger than the national average, providing more than 3,000 local jobs in the nuclear sector, according to Marjette Upshur, director of economic development and tourism.

"Since we already have a thriving nuclear sector in Lynchburg, the City of Lynchburg and our partners are working together to support and grow this important industry within the city," she said.

With nearly 7,600 employees across the U.S., Canada and the United Kingdom, BWXT's Mount Athos facility is the largest site. Rex Geveden, CEO, said Lynchburg's workforce has grown under his leadership, with about 2,800 employees in the region — representing one third of the company's global workforce.

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Geveden said BWXT was no stranger to innovation, as the company's expertise lay in manufacturing components for the naval nuclear program. Drawing parallels between nuclear and conventional power generation, he emphasized how both involved harnessing heat to generate electricity through turbine engines.

Additionally, the company has expanded its business portfolio, securing projects, such as the space-based reactor DRACO and the terrestrial reactor Pele.

The company's involvement in cutting-edge projects such as micro and space reactors, nuclear medicine, specialty materials and fuels research, environmental restoration and clean energy are all a part of the company's mission.

The search for the optimal site for BWXT's operations commenced in 1954, a pivotal era characterized by the burgeoning atomic age. As the world began to recognize the potential of nuclear power for electricity generation and other applications, BWXT, a company originally founded in 1867 and previously engaged in naval nuclear programs, set its sights on a site that could propel commercial nuclear power into the future.

Detailing the site selection process, Geveden said multiple factors influenced the decision. The physical attributes of the site were paramount, considering soil conditions, natural defense and location away from aquifers. The Lynchburg site, situated on a peninsula along the James River at Mount Athos offering natural protection, fit these criteria perfectly. Moreover, the positive living conditions, strong education systems and supportive community weighed in the decision-making process, he said.

Geveden said BWXT has a commitment to community development with its benevolence campaigns, leadership positions in community organizations and scholarships for local students.

Additionally, Geveden emphasized the company's economic impact, providing high-quality jobs and contributing to the region's prosperity.

The Lynchburg workforce at BWXT puts \$90 million back into the local economy.

"There is an undeniable and extremely powerful economic impact on the region and these jobs that we have range all the way from executive level jobs down to very high-paying craft labor jobs," he said. "These are high-quality jobs and they put a ton of

money into the local economy and the absence of it would be impactful.”

He also stressed BWXT’s role in shaping the community culture through stringent employee qualifications, which require security clearance, promoting a sense of responsibility and ethical behavior.

Looking forward, he said he is excited about the thriving nuclear market and the evolving landscape of energy security and urbanization.

“It’s a very exciting time to be in our business,” he said.

Additionally, Framatome has a strong presence in the U.S. nuclear energy market, helping power 36 million American homes. As a reliable partner with a long history of proven performance, it focuses on servicing and supporting secondary license renewal as well as new nuclear reactor development, and advancing the future of nuclear energy globally, Kathy Williams, CEO, said. Framatome was founded in 1958.

“Nuclear energy is deeply rooted in the state of Virginia and more importantly, right here in the Lynchburg region,” she said. “With Lynchburg being the home of our North America headquarters for more than 50 years, our teams lead in advancing the nuclear industry by providing breakthrough innovations in research, development and technology that our customers count on.”

She said Framatome is excited about the outpouring of public acceptance for clean, reliable, nuclear energy.

“Our employees’ passion and expertise positions us to lead this industry through the realization of the next generation of nuclear energy production and medical isotopes development, while maintaining the industry’s operational nuclear reactors.”

She said this is a moment of historic growth for nuclear energy and Framatome with a full pipeline and years of backlog orders to serve the critical mission for the future of the planet and clean energy economy.

Above all, Framatome is proud of its people.

“Our workforce is dedicated to upholding strong values of safety, integrity, passion, performance and dedication to the future. To prepare for our future, we are striving for a more inclusive workplace that unites diverse perspectives in our shared mission to deliver clean energy,” she said.

Its employees provide time, talent and resources to serve the community throughout the year, she said.

“We are currently implementing our Directed Giving campaign — an effort that spotlights our employees’ support to the communities where we live and work. Employees donate, volunteer and advocate for organizations of their choice, giving them the opportunity to [be] part of something bigger than themselves,” Williams said.

One program the company is proud of is the recent relaunch of Framatome’s Nuclear Technology Academy. This is a collaborative workforce development partnership with Central Virginia Community College that provides students with hands-on experience in the energy industry.

The program is designed to have students pursue degrees in nuclear technician specialties, rotating each semester between the classroom and working in real-world environments at Framatome customer sites. Students receive full-time pay and benefits, and all tuition and fee costs are covered by Framatome for the duration of the program, Williams said.

“This is an excellent opportunity for recent high school graduates as well as individuals interested in a career change opportunity,” she said.

She said the company is excited about the future of several ongoing projects. For example, it recently received nuclear regulatory qualification for Framatome’s spray-in-place liner for use in buried piping maintenance.

“Advancements in nuclear fuel are driving growth as we showcase our expertise with new fuel designs that increase safety and performance and lowers costs for our customers,” she said. “We are proud of our leading position in aggressively designing, developing and implementing accident tolerant fuel [ATF] as part of the U.S. Department of Energy’s ATF program. This new fuel design increases the safety of today’s plants and improves its performance at a crucial time for the industry. We are also actively developing new fuel technologies for the next generation of nuclear energy generation.”

Lynchburg is America’s nuclear city — the center for excellence in nuclear innovation, Megan Lucas, CEO and chief economic development officer of the Lynchburg Regional Business Alliance, said.

“We couldn’t be prouder to be the home of BWXT and Framatome and working together with them to grow and innovate,” she said.

She said nuclear has had a long-standing history in the region as the economic engine of the city’s manufacturing industry.

“With BWXT’s recent expansion of their innovation campus and Framatome’s relaunch of the Nuclear Technology Academy, we are seeing continued investments in nuclear at the local level,” she said. “They continue to choose to invest in the Lynchburg region because they know it is a great place for business with a strong nuclear workforce and resources and we will help them as they continue to grow.”

She said the region benefits greatly from BWXT and Framatome’s innovation.

“Right now, they employ nearly 4,000 people locally in high-paying jobs and their business growth increases our region’s tax base and encourages more nuclear providers to do business in our region —creating even more jobs and investment in our community,” Lucas said.

This summer, with the Lynchburg Regional Business Alliance, the office of economic development formed a consortium called the Lynchburg Regional NITCH — Nuclear Industrial Technology Commercialization Hub — to submit a proposal for the federal EDA Phase 1 Technology Hub Strategy Development Grant.

This planning grant would help create strategies to advance and grow the nuclear technology sector and position the city of Lynchburg for significant economic growth, Upshur said.

“It’s also important to highlight innovative workforce development strategies that are already in place to bolster the nuclear industry in Lynchburg,” she said. “Framatome partnered with CVCC to launch the Framatome Nuclear Technology Academy, providing both classroom and hands-on training for those interested in joining the energy sector — it is available to current and future CVCC-enrolled students. Upon successful completion of the program, participants begin their full-time careers as nuclear technicians, growing the next generation of nuclear engineers and streamlining pathways to the nuclear industry.”

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ALERT FEATURED TOP STORY

The Bedford Avenue Business Boom

Rachael Smith

Oct 9, 2023



The Flour District at 2204 Bedford Ave. is hosting culinary classes in the teaching kitchen and renting its space for pr
Provided photo

Rachael Smith

In the past five years Bedford Avenue has been booming with new businesses, starting with Golf Park Coffee, Bentley's, Taco Jesús, Marsh Roots Seafood Company and the 2204 building, which houses the Rivermont Refillery, Rhodora Speciality, Truss, Scratch Pasta and the Flour District.

The new business district is becoming a bridge from Boonsboro to downtown, making it an inviting street for anyone.

“This incredible vision for the Bedford Avenue Business District came from several committed local developers who approached the Office of Economic Development & Tourism about their plans for several properties on Bedford Avenue and the idea of creating a cohesive, walkable district with restaurants, retail, housing and services,” said Marjette Upshur, director of Economic Development and Tourism for the city of Lynchburg.

She said the office and developers have worked together to explore improvements for the district, and prioritize what the city already had planned for the area, including use of one of the EPA Brownfield Assessment grants and what could be possible in a public-private partnership with property owners.

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“The developers have worked together to pitch ideas for improvement to their neighbors, including Randolph College, The Dahlia, Dollar General and Flowers Foods, to name a few. The significant work already done in the district, like the redevelopment of Bedford 2204 and the Bedford Exchange, has only continued to energize these collective efforts,” she said.

The most recent newcomer to the district, Jesús Ochoa, plans to open Taco Jesús this fall at 2309 Bedford Ave.

“I’m happy with the street. It’s looking better every time I see it,” he said. “It’s exciting to see. To go from, ‘This may not be a good place to be’ to ‘This is where I spend all my time,’ it brings me joy.”

Ochoa hopes to see the street grow even further to the point of even seeing a footbridge for pedestrian traffic to cross the road.

“I get to be a part of it, I guess I didn’t think about it this way, that is my little bit of a contribution, it’s exciting,” he said.

When Oliver Russell, owner of Marsh Roots Seafood Company, started his business in 2020 at the Lynchburg Community Market, he had hopes of one day operating out of his own brick and mortar store.

That dream became a reality this spring when he moved the seafood business into 2300 Bedford Ave.

“It’s kind of the up-and-coming street in Lynchburg,” he said. “We’d always drive by it and think that would be the perfect place.”

Russell wants to see a community foster in the Bedford Avenue area with a walkable street and businesses holding fun events on the weekend.

“I want it to become the happening place to be in Lynchburg and when you say Bedford Avenue, everybody knows like, ‘Oh, that’s the cool street town,’” he said.

Stephanie Fees, owner of Scratch Pasta and part owner of the 2204 Bedford Ave. building, started her business in 2017 and had been looking for a shop all over town since 2020.

“We looked all over the city and I always wanted to be on Bedford Avenue because it’s so convenient. It’s between downtown and Boonsboro and it just seemed like it was an up-and-coming area and a lot of people go through there every day,” she said.

The building at 2204 was purchased in 2021 and opened in May of this year.

“I think everybody you know within our complex and as well as Marsh Roots and Golf Park are very focused on the local community and also of supporting each other. We’re all friends and it’s a lot of really amazing, creative people within a very small radius,” she said.

The businesses are all run and owned separately but they’re interconnected physically under one roof and Truss will use Scratch Pasta’s products, and Scratch Pasta will use Marsh Roots, and vice-versa.

She’s happiest when she sees a group on a walk and they stop in at the coffee shop, then the bakery followed by grabbing pasta for dinner and walk home.

“That is the best thing and hopefully with our work with the city, we can improve that even more,” she said.

Wray Warner, the chef at Truss, said he is amazed to see the building’s transformation and how the community has found it to be a gathering spot.

“The building has come a long way; it’s been completely revamped,” he said.

He’s been excited to hire staff who live within walking distance of the establishment as well.

“Employment opportunities have opened up for people who previously had to rely on buses to commute to work. Now, they can simply walk here, which is fantastic,” he noted.

“People that had to take a bus downtown or a bus somewhere else to work can now walk to work here, which is great,” he said.

Looking ahead, Warner is optimistic about the continued growth of the community, with newcomers such as Taco Jesús and the addition of apartments in the area expected to bring even more foot traffic.

“My hope for the future is to see it keep growing and see more foot traffic. Families walking, kids riding their bikes, making it a place people can kind of come hang out, feel safe, feel comfortable. And I think we’re doing that and it’ll also be nice to continually find local talent within the neighborhood and keep trying to employ them,” he said.

Jill Fees, owner of the Rivermont Refillery, pointed out the diverse range of businesses that have set up shop in the area, including insurance companies, florists, pizzerias and eateries such as Magnolia Foods.

“It’s a business district that’s truly coming into its own,” she said.

The Refillery, a store specializing in eco-friendly refills, is somewhat of a rarity in smaller towns, Fees said.

“Refilleries are usually in larger cities that have a lot of people that support them, because refills are not a big money price item so you have to have a lot of customers to support it to do the refill,” she said. “The idea of our store was to stop plastic waste by doing refills natural products to refill with.”

Given the community’s natural surroundings, with the Blue Ridge Mountains and the James River, there is a strong focus on environmental awareness among residents.

“Many people in this community are very conscious of the environment, which has made them supportive of our store. However, like any business, we’re always looking to expand our customer base,” she said.

Jill Fees said it’s been exciting to watch her daughter’s vision come to life.

“It was Stephanie’s vision all along to move her pasta business into a hardscape place instead of our basement. We found this building and it was in shambles, it was a true labor of love,” she said.

The multi-business complex has become a hub where various entrepreneurs can offer their products and services, making it a one-stop destination for the community.

“We’re just so excited to be here to serve the community that we love,” she said.

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https://newsadvance.com/news/local/with-lu-ownership-a-look-at-the-changes-at-river-ridge-over-the-past-7/article_48c02d0c-ea98-11ed-ad2c-2bca64b0c937.html

ALERT POPULAR TOP STORY

With LU ownership, a look at the changes at River Ridge over the past 7 years

Rachael Smith

May 8, 2023



Duck Doughnuts and Papá Gallo's outdoor seating is shown at River Ridge Mall on May 3. The mall has announced festivities.

Paige Dinger, The News & Advance file

Rachael Smith

Opened in 1980, River Ridge mall has been a vital part of the Lynchburg and Central Virginia economy.

The \$50 million project had cleared 80 acres of land off Candler's Mountain Road.

Many Lynchburg residents will remember Thalhimers, Miller & Rhoads, Leggett's, Value City, Hecht's, Kirkland's, FYE and Sears being located inside the mall.

Since the 1980s, stores have opened and closed throughout the years, but with the eventual takeover of the mall by Liberty University, there's been an undeniable shift at River Ridge.

Melissa Faria has been involved with the mall for 20 years between being a tenant, working for a cell phone store, and now working as the general manager of the mall, said the community has always loved the mall and been rooting for its success.

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"Definitely, at times, things were a little rougher," she said. "But I would say back in the early 2000s, probably up until the Great Recession in 2008, there was some pretty good activity here. We had some great stores."

She mentioned when the mall had stores such as Pac Sun, Body Central and Aeropostale.

"So it definitely was starting to look a little dated even back then as far as the finishes and interior and things like that. In early 2000s, I think we had some challenges, but there were some pretty good store lineups at that time. And then the 2008, 2009

recession came along and that's really kind of when some of the stores started to go out and things changed.”

At that point, she said the state of the mall wasn't good because there were many repairs that had been kicked down the road and the skylight in the middle of the mall was beginning to leak.

“There were roof leaks, skylights were leaking, there were buckets everywhere. It was like it was raining inside because there were so many leaks on the floor just wasn't in great shape. The exterior landscaping was nonexistent and the parking lot wasn't in great shape,” she said.

In 2012, Liberty University purchased the Sears building for online staff support.

Craig Pettitt, vice president of real estate for LU, said the university was gearing up at that time for its online businesses and needed a place to house that operation.

“Jerry Jr. heard that Sears was closing a bunch of stores and ended up buying the building. When Macy's was closing and announcing closing them stores, Jerry picked up the phone and called them and got Macy's,” he said. “The benefit of all that is that most malls own their own land and so a lot of times they can really hinder doing a redevelopment like we did, but we had the benefit of owning the West End and the East End. So we were able to just get started and on faith and it was really more of that ‘If you build it, hopefully they will come.’”

In 2016, LU purchased a 75% share of River Ridge from CBL & Associates Properties Inc.

Pettitt started in the mall business in 1982 and said just like other typical malls of the 1980s, River Ridge was a place where kids hang out and couples had dates. It was a time before online shopping and Amazon.

He said when Liberty took over ownership, LU knew there had to be a change.

“We had to do something or we were going to go the way of many other models with having 20% of the stores open and having a ton of temporary stores or it becoming an Amazon distribution center or something. I mean it was going towards maybe not even being a mall,” he said.

According to Pettitt, most Real Estate Investment Trusts (REITs) would not have done what LU did because they are public companies trying to get a good deal.

A REIT is a company that owns and typically operates income-producing real estate or related assets and allow individuals to invest in large-scale, income-producing real estate.

“We are committed to the community and it wasn’t just a business decision, it was almost a defensive move to literally build it and hope that they will come,” he said.

In 2017, LU purchased the Macy’s building after it closed, now known as the West End where Papa Gallo Cocina Mexicana and Duck Donuts are now located. Later that year, it purchased the remaining 25% of the mall.

In 2019 the East End was developed where HomeGoods, Dicks Sporting Goods and soon-to-be Ulta are located.

When Dicks opened in the fall of 2020, even though it had only moved from Wards Road to the mall, Pettitt said it sent a message to other retailers showing that the big box store was willing to do that.

“And then we’re talking to HomeGoods and we call it the cowbell effect because then all of a sudden Ulta who would not return our calls and was never coming to Lynchburg saw that HomeGoods was signed and now we’ve got Ulta opening this summer,” he said.

The mall previously had a deal with H&M in the middle of COVID that fell through and they’re back in talks with LU about a deal. Additionally, the same thing happened with an arcade, sports bar and restaurant similar to Dave & Buster’s that is now

talking to the mall again.

“So sometimes you go two steps forward, one back and then sometimes one step forward and two back,” he said.

With renovations, one of the biggest changes that LU started with was the middle of the mall.

“We wanted it to be something special and a place where whether its students or seniors can come and hang out so we added the fireplace and the amphitheater, the charging stations so it’s like a cool hangout spot,” Pettitt said.

It also added a new play area and brought SeaQuest in so moms would come back to the mall with their children.

“A lot of moms in this town were buying online or on Wards Road and then the mom comes in and brings her kids to go to SeaQuest and she’s going see something that she wants in other parts of the mall,” he said.

A new food hall also was renovated and developed with favorites such as Farmers Garden and Chick-fil-A remaining but adding in Auntie Annie’s, Cinnabon, Grounded, Mein Bowl and Zaza Pizza.

“People told us in the beginning that there are a lot of great artists out there that draw pretty pictures, but a lot of them never do it and so we had to get the bulldozers moving and the demo working so that they knew we did we weren’t just smoke and mirrors,” Pettitt said.

To date, the mall has spent about \$60 million on mall improvements since it purchased the building and is heading towards \$80 million.

Since February of 2018, the mall has seen an increase in sales per square foot since of 43% and visits have trended at an increase of 48% from 2020 to present. Faria said visits have increased 8% from 2021 to 2022 and is trending up 5% for the current year.

“With the dedication from Liberty, a lot of the national tenants that we do have, they’re more invested in their space as well,” she said. “Now several of them will be doing renovations and upgrades to their storefronts as the months and the years go on.”

The icing on the cake is the completion of the West End, Pettitt said, but the pandemic slowed down progress.

“That’s still fenced off where Macy’s used to be and that’s where we did have an entertainment concept,” he said. “There’s going to be a park out there, we’re going to have events, movie nights, during the winter season we’re going to have ice skating out there for families and that’s where really I think will truly become the town center.”



If the shoe fits, wear it! But that isn’t the only trick of the sole trade when it comes to buying workout shoes. Lifehacker reports, finding the right workout shoes can sometimes be even harder than the workout itself! Buzz60’s Chloe Hurst has the answer.

By Rachael Smith

Reporter

