

Business park boost for jobs blackspot

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MORE than £100m will help transform one of the region's worst unemployment blackspots into a business park that could create more than 2,000 jobs, The Northern Echo can reveal.

A consortium of developers is drawing up plans to create office accommodation on the 55-acre Black & Decker site, in Spennymoor, County Durham.

The town has been hit by a series of blows in recent years.

Black & Decker, which shed 950 jobs at its Spennymoor site in 1997, announced the loss of a further 169 manufacturing jobs last year.

Electrolux, which closed its Spennymoor refrigeration plant in 1997 with the loss of 650 jobs, shed 500 more last year when its cooker factory shut.

Only last week, 100 workers at the town's K Hartwall factory were told their jobs were under threat, with bosses announcing that "tough trading conditions" could lead to redundancies.

Today's news will help to lift the gloom, which has seen the number of people employed in manufacturing in Sedgefield borough fall by half to about 8,000 in ten years.

The development, on part of the Black & Decker site, will be known as Durham Gateway and will be one of the largest in the region.

Infrastructure group Carillion has joined forces with Hartlepool firm Arlington to develop the site, which is part of the Green Lane Industrial estate.

Black & Decker confirmed last month it was shedding half its workforce and stopping manufacturing in Spennymoor.

However, the power tool company is leasing part of its office building back from the consortium and will keep about 150 staff in research and development work.

Although the plans are in the early stages, developers say they could include:

- Road upgrades, including a fifth exit on the Thinford Roundabout, and a new roundabout on the A167 by the Coach And Horses pub, linking the back of the industrial estate to the main road;
- Office accommodation;
- A surgery and pharmacy;
- A hotel and restaurant or pub;
- A gym and pool.

The consortium has appointed Newcastle architects Faulkner Brown to develop plans for Durham Gateway.

Allan Cook, the managing director of Arlington Real Estate, said: "We have come to this on the basis that we really believe in Spennymoor.

"It is in a good location, right on the A1 near Durham City and it has the population of Spennymoor as an asset to draw on.

"But it is also well-placed for the whole North-East workforce.

"I am conscious that we do not want to over-promise."

He said it had the potential to create more than 2,000 jobs, but said: "I do not want to promise that because the people of Spennymoor have had that in the past."

Neil McMillan, development director of Carillion Developments, said: "From a property development point of view, we are particularly interested in the North-East at the moment.

"Manchester and Leeds have had significant regeneration over the last five years, and now it is the turn of smaller city regions.

"County Durham is not punching its weight in the region at the moment, but Durham is an internationally recognised city and it is ideally placed to draw the workforce from both Tyneside and Teesside and across the North-East."

To help fund the development, the consortium plans to include about 300 homes on the site.

A planning application is expected to be ready by the summer, and it is hoped approval will be gained by the end of the year. Mr McMillan said that work could begin within the next 18 to 24 months and would start with the infrastructure.

Stewart Watkins, managing director of the County Durham Development Company, said: "This is exactly the type of high-quality, private-sector initiative that will revitalise this strategic area of County Durham, and enable Spennymoor to bounce back from recent announcements of job losses.

"A spokeswoman for development agency One NorthEast said: "This site has tremendous potential and the proposed plans for the area are certainly encouraging.

"We look forward to hearing in more detail from the developers to see how their proposals can be taken forward."

Thorn Lighting has recently reinforced its commitment to the town with a factory being built on the Green Lane Industrial Estate, which will secure about 600 jobs.