

## Okaloosa County Economic Development Council attracts third firm

July 21, 2011 5:36 PM  
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FORT WALTON BEACH — With two successful graduates and a new business that is growing, the Okaloosa County Economic Development Council's Innovation Center has been a hit.

The Economic Development Council its business incubator program at the W.E. Combs Campus on Lovejoy Road in 2009 as a way to help new businesses make it through their first few years. Two companies, Government Support Jobs and Grey Aviation, graduated from the program earlier this year and have opened new locations in Destin. A third firm, J&P Khamken Industries, recently joined the program.

"The whole concept behind the incubator is to nurture the company so they can grow and stabilize and then help them find space in the county so they can expand," said Larry Sassano, president of the EDC. "We were happy (Government Support Jobs and Grey Aviation) stayed in Okaloosa County. The incubator helped them get their feet on the ground and now they're in the running phase of their development."

The Innovation Center is designed to target technology-based businesses. The incubator provides planning assistance from other EDC members, financial counseling and lower operating costs through reduced leases.

"Larry and the EDC were very helpful with support, putting us in contact with people who might be able to help us," said Jerry Pfeiffer, owner of Government Support Jobs. "The (University of West Florida) was very helpful in providing the infrastructure. There were a lot of things we didn't have to worry about other than just growing the business. That was very useful."

J&P Khamken Industries, whose core business is in machining and fabrication work, actually started in Montgomery, Ala., in 2000. The company has done service work, construction and IT work in the area for a few years, but the innovation center is its first dedicated office space locally.

"The EDC has been a big player in us opening an office here," said Dwight Howard, chief operating officer of J&P Khamken, who was formerly with Spectrum. "We've received a lot of help from them. Being in the Innovation Center allows us to take advantage of all of the people that's a member of the EDC as far as a relationship, working with them, knowing who they are," he added. "It's a very significant price facility for new businesses starting up in the area or opening in the area. Our cost of overhead in the Innovation Center is significantly less. It allows us to grow."

J&P Khamken was selected by the U.S. Small Business Administration earlier this as the national subcontractor of year. J&P Khamken's local office has six regular employees and 40 contract workers. Between the Fort Walton Beach and Montgomery operations, he said the company expects to hire 40 more employees in the next year.

"We fully intend to grow the services side of our business and we fully intend to grow the construction and IT sides," Howard said. "We're going to center that business out of the Fort Walton Beach area."