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Testing Technology in a Ghost Town

A 20-square-mile town is planned solely to test emerging intelligent and green technologies and innovations -- no inhabitants necessary.

BY: JESSICA MULHOLLAND | SEPTEMBER 20, 2011



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Remember the 1996 movie *Bio-Dome*, where two guys mistakenly became trapped in a closed ecological system and were forced to learn how to protect the Earth? Fifteen years later, a project with a similar mission has been planned, though no one will remain inside.

In fact, there is no "inside." It will be a ghost town that an international technology development firm wants to build on up to 20 square miles of open, unimproved land in New Mexico. The town, designed to replicate a modern U.S. city, would give public- and private-sector entities a place to test projects like renewable energy systems, smart grid cybersecurity and the limits of wireless systems before implementing them in a real city.

This new town, dubbed [The Center for Innovation, Testing and Evaluation](#), will cost Washington, D.C.-based Pegasus Global Holdings about \$200 million to create. The company has entered into a memorandum of understanding with the state of New Mexico, and is currently conducting a five-month study to determine the Center's feasibility, scope and scale. Construction on The Center is expected to begin next June, with a projected opening date of June 2014.

"We are pleased to be able to offer the resources, open spaces, and talented workforce required to make this effort a success," New Mexico Gov. Susana Martinez said in a press release. "My administration is committed to an ongoing relationship with Pegasus that will allow the Center to thrive and create New Mexico jobs."

The idea for the Center emerged from challenges in trying to test new and emerging technologies beyond a lab environment, says Pegasus CEO Robert Brumley. The first challenge, he notes, is the availability of facilities. "A lot of proving grounds are in support of both the Iraq and Afghani conflicts," he says. "The military has first call on those facilities."

Another challenge is cost. Unless a company is testing under a government contract or sponsorship, the price to evaluate a technology can be quite high. One facility quoted Pegasus \$100,000 per day for its use.

Finally, there are challenges with security clearances and intellectual property protection. "You have to stay with your equipment while it's being tested, instead of just loaning it to someone (such as a lab professional) who would then test your experiment with theirs [equipment] and then give you the technical data," Brumley says. Oftentimes, the data from such experiments is marked as classified, and is unattainable without the proper security clearance. "A facility where you go interact both in terms of your experiment and exchanging ideas -- it doesn't exist on the scale we're talking about," he says.

The Center aims to fix all that. The feasibility study will ultimately help determine what entities will be charged to test their innovations. Brumley says that Pegasus Global wants to make pricing comparable to pricing that currently exists for government entities. The Center will also derive some of its revenue from user fees and the sale of excess utility output, such as power generation, water treatment and wireless infrastructure.

But how can certain technologies true capabilities be tested in an area without people? Portland State University urban

planning professor Anthony Rufolo posed this question in an [ABC News story](#). "It sounds like a risky concept to me," he said. "Obviously some things, like the canyon effects of broadcast could be tested, but I don't know how you could test recycled water without people there to generate wastewater."

However, Brumley says that wastewater and clean water usage data do not require a human being. The human aspect that a company or research institution wants to replicate, he says, can be modeled, programmed and monitored, giving a realistic view of how it would perform placed in a populated city. For example, sensors in a toilet can flush automatically, mimicking human usage.

Company leaders think the growth in the Center will be substantially greater in 10 to 15 years, Brumley says. "The experience has been the same. Mojave, Yuma, Dahlgren – almost all these facilities that have had that kind of investment and that are active and busy, especially in the technology area, they've grown," he says. "Innovation in technology is going to be hot for the next generation, because we're shifting money away from defense and into innovation."

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