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GPEC solar trip strengthens ties to China

Phoenix Business Journal - by Patrick O'Grady

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The **Greater Phoenix Economic Council** has been pushing solar as the centerpiece to its business recruitment effort and a recent visit to China shows the strategy may be paying off.

Whether the GPEC contingent's trip brings long-term leads is uncertain, but meetings went beyond the first steps.

"There seems to be a very genuine interest from CEOs and government officials about exploring the opportunities in the U.S. and Arizona," said **Chris Camacho**, vice president of business development for GPEC.

GPEC, along with representatives from Arizona Commerce Authority and Arizona State University, were at the SNEC International Photovoltaic Power Generation Conference last week.

The group met with more than 80 solar companies during the week-long conference, including 12 that could be suppliers to one of panel manufacturers lured to the Valley last year during a single lunch.

GPEC won't disclose prospects, citing non-disclosure agreements, but the continued visits to China might land some bigger announcements for companies in the next year, Camacho said.

"It wouldn't surprise me if we had three or four major Chinese investments in the next 12 to 18 months," he said.

The conference, held in Shanghai, featured a worldwide cast of industry players, including Tempe-based First Solar Inc., but Chinese companies were dominant.

Arizona was the only state represented with the Chinese fairly receptive to the message and knowledgeable about the state's solar market.

[Suntech Power Holdings Co. Ltd. decision to locate in Goodyear more than a year ago has helped open doors.](#)

Regional governments, in particular, can hold sway over what companies are looking at locating overseas so good relationships with officials can be paramount in helping bridge economic connections between China and Arizona, said **Rudy Vetter**, senior vice president of international business development at GPEC.

As for Arizona's benefits, GPEC continues to pitch the burgeoning solar market and close proximity to the biggest U.S. market, California.

"We're the new West Coast," he said. "They look for connections to the Pacific Ocean. That's why they like Vancouver and San Francisco and Los Angeles. We're trying to expand that."

GPEC has been coordinating more with the Arizona Commerce Authority as that group has changed its focus to recruit solar and renewable companies. Officials from the ACA, however, were not available to talk about the trip.

Coordination is needed, not only with ACA, but among various regional economic development organizations, including those in Yuma and Tucson, Camacho said.

China still represents a relatively small portion of GPEC's potential deals. The organization is working with about 200 companies, only 3 percent to 5 percent are Chinese.

The benefit of those deals is they involve bigger fish, potentially bringing in more jobs.

Bigger fish, however, need a lot more work to reel in, Vetter said. "It definitely is a lot of tough work ahead of us."