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Washington River Protection Solutions gives to Delta High School

BY TY BEAVER, TRI-CITY HERALD

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The president of a Hanford contractor said Thursday that the United States has fallen far down the list in its leadership in science and technology-based fields.

And Mike Johnson and others at Washington River Protection Solutions hope a \$150,000 check will help future graduates of Delta High School in Richland reverse that trend.

Johnson, president and project manager at WRPS, presented the check to two students of the science, technology, engineering and math, or STEM, school at Columbia Basin College in Pasco.

Hundreds of students, already on CBC's Pasco campus for the annual STEMcon event, applauded the donation, along with a handful of area education officials.

"If we're going to compete globally, we have to do better," Johnson told the crowd.

The money will go toward building a new home for Delta High in west Pasco. Tri-City school officials and the foundation are still waiting to see whether the state will provide the bulk of the money needed for the project but said WRPS' donation was important for the future of the school and its students.

"This is another great example of the community stepping forward," Tom Yount, president of the board for the Washington State STEM Education Foundation, told the Herald.

Delta High is jointly operated by the Pasco, Richland and Kennewick school districts, with support from the foundation and private partners. It has about 340 students and will graduate its first senior class this spring.

The school uses buildings owned by Columbia Basin College on Northgate Avenue in Richland, as well as some classrooms in a neighboring building. The college has said it will need those classrooms back. The current lease ends in 2014.

WRPS, a consortium of contractors URS Corporation, EnergySolutions and Areva, is the second major Hanford contractor to contribute to the construction fund. Bechtel National donated \$250,000 in late January. More than \$1 million has been collected for the project altogether.

"It's taking all of us to get this done," Pasco Superintendent Sandra Hill told the Herald.

Johnson said he was blown away by the work being done at Delta High when he first visited the school. Delta's continued success is critical to bringing the U.S. back to the best in the world in STEM fields.

"We're behind lots of folks we should not be behind," he told Thursday's crowd, noting the U.S. rank of 24th in STEM leadership by nation, behind countries such as Chile and Estonia.

Building a new Delta High has been estimated to cost around \$18 million, and the districts and foundation are requesting any money beyond that provided by donors to come from the state, either through matching dollars or a \$5.4 million request from the foundation.

The districts will have to wait to see if any state matching dollars are allocated to the school. Delays getting a joint agreement hammered out between the districts caused them to miss the current cycle of payments to be distributed this summer.

However, Yount, who is also executive vice president of engineering & technology at EnergySolutions, said he plans to hear an update on the foundation's request by the end of April and the foundation is also talking to other community leaders about support for the school.

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