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West Deptford Power Plant Jobs Fill Major Need, Say Union Members

*By Bryan Littel
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Gene Martin looked through a curtain of light snow, across a weed-choked field at a trio of deteriorating cooling tower blocks and saw stability and opportunity.

Martin, a pipefitter from Blackwood and a member of Local 322, has weathered a difficult economy much like his union brothers: Piecemeal work here and there, whether at the Revel casino project in Atlantic City or elsewhere, and otherwise surviving on unemployment money.

Even that's started to run out, though, which is why the groundbreaking on LS Power's West Deptford Energy Station Wednesday was so important: The massive, multi-year construction project means one thing—long-term jobs.

"We've been waiting a long time for it, and finally it's going to happen," Martin said.

He was one of dozens of union members in attendance at the ceremony, their presence announced by navy satin jackets or bright red hooded sweatshirts, and they brought thunderous applause as company and government officials touted the massive investment and 600-plus jobs.

Martin said he's heard about plans for a power plant at the site dating back to the '90s, when it was the Crown/Vista coal-burning project, to a similar plan by California-based PG&E a decade ago. It was a constant buzz around the union hall.

"They'd say, 'The West Deptford co-gen's a go,'" he said. That'd be followed by weeks or months of no news, leaving everyone wondering what happened. Now, there's no wondering.

Work could get started on the plant as early as next month, with plans currently calling for a 738-megawatt station on the 300-acre plot of land, though there's potential for another 400 megawatts to be added in an expansion already under development.

Gloucester County Freeholder Director Robert Damminger said the power plant will be a boon to the region, especially its workers. "I'm happy for my brothers in organized labor—we'll get some guys to work and get a good project underway," he said.

West Deptford Mayor Ray Chintall said the project could rekindle a certain spirit in the area, as the ripples from the project spread out to benefit local and regional businesses. Chintall said just seeing a major project like this get underway could be a catalyst to giving people concrete evidence the economy has started to turn a corner.

"If you feel things are improving, people start going out and spending on their own," he said.