The nine-year-old Louisiana Immersive Technologies Enterprise center in the University of Louisiana at Lafayette's Research Park is embarking on a critical new era as state funding has dried up and LITE seeks to chart a self-sustaining path to the future.

Technology facility streamlining practices as state funding dries up

BY RICHARD BURGESS | rburgess@theadvocate.com

The Louisiana Immersive Technologies Enterprise facility stands out on Cajundome Boulevard, marked by a giant, egg-shaped glass appendage that rises more than two stories on the side of the building.

At night, it glows.

LITE - known most for its high-end, 3-D visualization capabilities - has been lauded as a symbol of Lafayette's commitment to the technology sector.
Commission member Tom Cox, but the 9-year-old center in the University of Louisiana at Lafayette's Research Park is embarking on a critical new era as state funding has dried up and LITE seeks to chart a self-sustaining path to the future.

Over the past year, several positions have been left vacant, including that of CEO, and LITE officials are banking on technology upgrades they hope will attract new projects to boost revenue.

"I see exciting opportunities," said Ramesh Kolluru, a LITE Commissioner and UL-Lafayette's vice president for research, who is cheerfully optimistic despite obvious budgetary challenges.

"The state paid to build the $27 million technology center, but the plan was for LITE to eventually generate most of its operating funds. State support was at $2.5 million for the 2011-12 budget year and accounted for more than 75 percent of total revenue.

Effective July 1, state funding hit zero, and other sources of revenue have not risen enough to fill the gap.

Projected revenue for the current budget year is $1.3 million, with $400,000 of that coming from a reserve fund that will last only a few more years if not replenished.

To operate within the constraints of its new financial reality, LITE has cut expenses for next year by more than half compared with four years ago.

"It really represents a retrenchment of the organization given the current budget," said LITE Commissioner Tom Cox, who is president and CEO of the Lafayette Economic Development Authority.

"We just made a conscious decision when people were looking to move off," said LITE Chief Operating Officer Erin Ryan.

The Center for Visual and Decision Informatics, a national research center established in 2012 by the University of Louisiana at Lafayette and Drexel University, is a community, a university, that had the foresight to invest in technology."

Will Bass, a software engineer with the Louisiana Immersive Technology Enterprise center, works on a computer that is used to run software on the Total Immersion Space, seen at top right, Wednesday in Lafayette.

LITE
Continued from page 1A

Marietta, who has worked at LITE for six years and was named COO last year.

"The new budget no longer has money for an IT help desk, a technical or a system administrator — Marietta said both positions have been outsourced — and funding also was cut for the receptionist, a project development director, one of LITE's two computer graphics artists and one of two software engineers.

"The current budget also has no money for a CEO, a leadership position that became vacant last year when former LITE CEO Ram Ng left for another job.

UL-Lafayette administrator Paula Carson stepped in to serve as interim CEO before she left earlier this year to take an out-of-state job at another university.

No decision has been made on when that position might be filled.

"In the absence of having a CEO on staff, we have a very active board," Marietta said.

LITE maintains a core staff of nine full-time employees, plus one part-time accountant and a software development intern.

Most of those employees are involved in managing the facility rather than developing technology — an event coordinator, marketing and business development director, housekeeper, maintenance worker, accountant, facility director.

Marietta said LITE is shifting away from keeping a substantial tech staff on the payroll, opting instead to bring in contract labor, depending on the demands of different projects.

Project revenue is one area of the budget LITE officials hope will boost in the near future.

LITE has invested about $480,000 in upgrades this year, including work to make its giant egg more user-friendly.

"While most residents have seen the egg from the outside, the kids have not experienced what's inside — a six-sided, virtual reality cave of sorts designed to give users an immersive 3-D experience.

A doctor could walk through a digital model of heart, a geologist might visualize massive amounts of seismic testing and core sample data in search of oil reserves, an astronaut could fly through a 3-D universe, or a ship builder could tour a virtual model of a seacraft to identify problems before construction starts.

Those types of 3-D, interactive experiences have been the most talked about facet of LITE, but the old software used to power the egg was so "clunky and cumbersome" that it discouraged some potential users, said Kolluru, a computer scientist by training who has been an enthusiastic booster for LITE even before he was appointed earlier this year to the commission overseeing the facility.

He said the upgrades, which are underway, will make it easier and cheaper for university researchers and private companies to tap LITE as a resource.

"I think it will pay off significantly in terms of bringing new opportunity," Kolluru said. "It opens it up for business users to come in and bring their data and for us to work with them quickly."

Kolluru sees much potential in future partnerships with the Academy of Interactive Entertainment, a technical school for video game design and graphics; Pixel Magic, a movie visual effects company; and host of other tech companies that have a home at LITE.

Earlier this year, the LITE staff moved to smaller accommodations to free up more prime real estate for paying tenants, Marietta said, and the facility is now completely leased out.

Lafayette Economic Development Authority President and CEO Greg Guthreans, whose organization helped oversee the push to make LITE a reality, said that despite challenges the facility might face, he has no doubt it has played a key role in attracting the increasing number of technology firms that have come to Lafayette in recent years, even if they don't use LITE.

"It impresses the heck out of companies looking to do business here," he said. "I think that what excites people is that here is a community, a university, that has the foresight to invest in technology."
The trees surrounding Cypress Lake can be seen Thursday through holes in the walls of Guillory Hall, which formerly housed the student cafeteria, as demolition of Guillory, Lafayette and Vermilion halls continues on the University of Louisiana at Lafayette campus.

**SPACE**
Continued from page 1B

The demolitions will open up the view of the union from Hebrard Boulevard to the lake.

"It's an opportunity to create some additional green space and a vantage point to the lake," said Wayne Domingue of Architects Southwest. The architectural firm planned and designed the Student Union revamp and will assist the university with the green space project, which is in the early design phase.

Domingue said the plan is to create a gathering space for students while enhancing the view of the Student Union and the lake.

Guillory Hall was once used as the campus bowling alley and later as a study hall before it was transformed into a temporary cafeteria during the Student Union construction. The building had a large outdoor area that overlooked Cypress Lake, which holds alligators and other wildlife.

"We hope to maintain the integrity of that overlook and also to create some type of area that would border the lake and still continue to preserve the natural habitat while allowing people to walk around the lake area. We want to open up that entire area and create an opportunity for a vantage point and visibility from Hebrard Boulevard that doesn't exist right now," Domingue said.

Work crews are on campus this week, and the demolition is expected to take several days to complete.

Follow Marsha Sills on Twitter, @Marsha_Sills.