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How Tulsa's PGA Championship helped land a \$1 billion manufacturing plant

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Tiger Woods hits a shot during the PGA Championship at Southern Hills Country Club in 2022. Woods was the player that Eliano Russo, head of Enel Green Power's 3Sun Gigafactory in Catania, Italy, came to see.

Tulsa World File

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A PGA golf tournament in Tulsa in May 2022 may have played a key role in largest economic development project in state history, officials said.

"Oklahoma got the first bite at the apple, the first crack," at landing Enel North America, which plans to build a **\$1 billion solar panel manufacturing facility** at the Tulsa Port of Inola, said Jonathan Gray, public policy director at 3SUN USA, the parent company of Enel North America.

Discussions with company officials, Tulsa Ports, the Tulsa Regional Chamber, the Oklahoma Department of Commerce and others had begun in December 2021.

In May 2022, **Eliano Russo**, head of Enel Green Power's 3Sun Gigafactory in Catania, Italy, was among officials to attend the PGA Championship at Southern Hills Country Club.

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Local Tulsa Regional Chamber officials bought him a PGA polo golf shirt.

“He appreciated that gift,” Gray said.

Tiger Woods, he said, “was really the one player he wanted to go see, of course, when we were there. Unfortunately, it was like hole 16, and Tiger like double-boogied or something like that. That was rough, but he had a great time,” Gray said.

Arthur Jackson, senior vice president of economic development of the chamber, and other chamber leaders met with Russo and Gray before the company had hired a site consultant or issued a formal request for proposals.

“We didn’t have much to go on,” Jackson said in a statement to the Tulsa World. “We didn’t have project scope. We didn’t have job numbers. We just knew it was going to be a large-scale manufacturing facility.”

That same day at Southern Hills, Russo and Gray met Gov. Kevin Stitt, Oklahoma Department of Commerce and Tulsa Ports representatives, and other regional partners, including those from Public Service Company of Oklahoma — which owned the land in Inola and provided much infrastructure years ago — before transferring it to Tulsa Ports in December 2019.

The chamber ultimately gave Gray and Russo mementos from the visit: green, Southern Hills-branded, Nike polo shirts from the Tiger Woods line, Jackson said.

“When we have host site visits for executives who haven’t been to Tulsa before, we typically like to give them some type of Tulsa-themed gift and use local suppliers when we can,” Jackson said.

“I figured this is a green-energy type company. So I thought let’s take advantage of kind of that green-energy type of color.”

Nearly exactly a year later, officials announced the mega project in Inola.

“I think Enel spoke for itself as far as the size of the company and their history and already having (green energy) operations in Oklahoma,” said Andrew Ralston, director of economic development at Tulsa Ports.

The company has a regional office in Oklahoma City and operates 13 wind farms across the state.

“I don’t think we understood really the scale of what the solar panel manufacturing project was going to look like, and even then I think the company was going through the process to understand what that scale would look like, as well,” Ralston said. “I think we were pleasantly surprised ... to find out just how large this project was and how game changing it would be for our region of the state.”

Ralston and Gray made the comments last week during a panel discussion at the chamber’s State of the Economy and Tulsa’s Future 2023 annual meeting at the Renaissance Tulsa Hotel & Convention Center. Jackson was the moderator.

The Italian company — “maybe the largest energy company you’ve never heard of,” Gray said — expects to invest more than \$1 billion in the new factory and create 1,000 new, permanent jobs by 2025. Enel says it may create another 900 jobs in a second phase of development.

Construction is expected to start early next year, with production by 2026 in a 1.5 million-square-foot facility (Phase I) on more than 2,200 acres, officials said.

Ralston said an additional \$150 million in infrastructure improvements — roads, water and other utilities — are planned in the next two years for Enel and other potential companies that could locate at the Port of Inola.

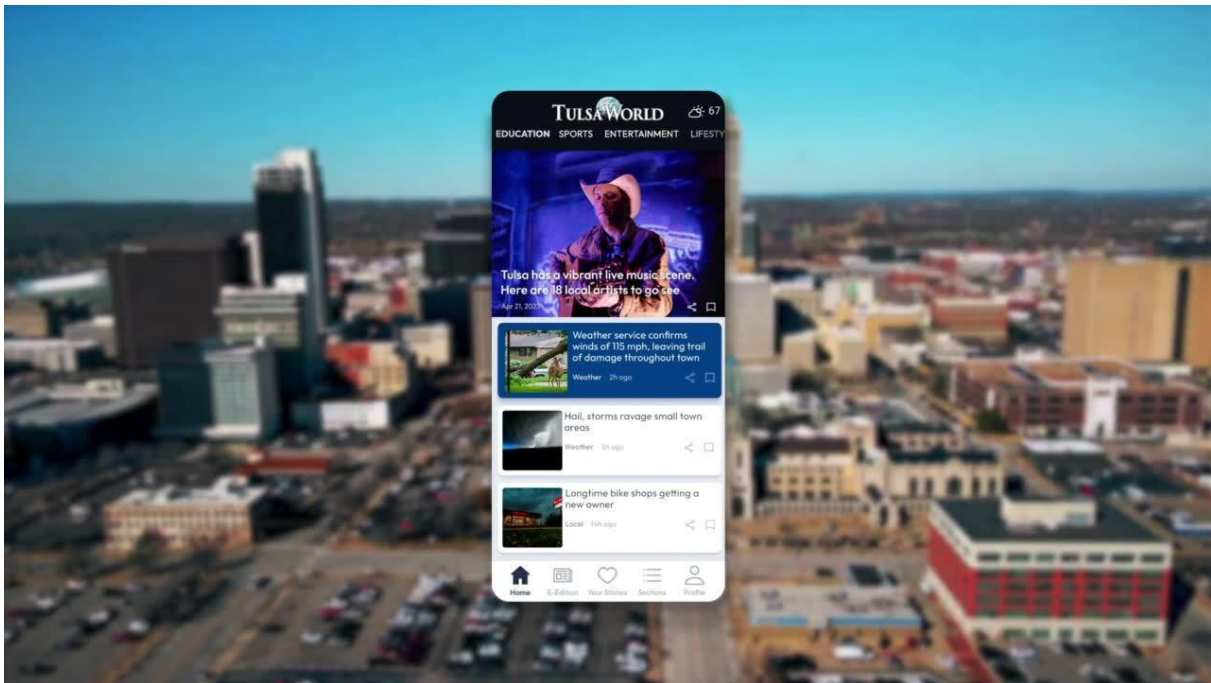
Enel’s announcement last May came days after Stitt signed into law a \$218.6 million incentive package to seal the deal. Stitt and Oklahoma Department of Commerce officials have said Enel’s factory will be the biggest economic development project in state history.

“Enel’s expansion is a huge win for Oklahoma, and I’m thrilled by their record investment in our state’s economy and workforce that will have a lasting legacy and continue to impact Oklahomans for generations,” Stitt said in a statement in May.

Lawmakers also earmarked \$38.6 million for water and sewer improvements at the Tulsa Port of Inola as part of the deal.

The Biden administration’s Inflation Reduction Act, which includes billions of dollars in subsidies to increase green energy development and encourage companies to build solar panels, wind turbines and electric vehicle batteries in the U.S., spurred Enel officials to look at sites for a new factory, according to a company news release.

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