

Wisconsin Assembly set to approve \$3 billion for Foxconn

August 17 2017, by Scott Bauer



In this May 27, 2010 file photo, a worker looks out through the logo at the entrance of the Foxconn complex in the southern Chinese city of Shenzhen. The Wisconsin Assembly plans to approve a \$3 billion tax break bill for Taiwan-based Foxconn Technology Group to build a new display panel factory in the state. The incentive package up for a vote Thursday, Aug. 16, 2017, would be the largest in state history and the biggest to a foreign company in U.S. history. (AP Photo/Kin Cheung, File)

The Wisconsin Assembly planned to approve a \$3 billion tax break

Thursday for Taiwan-based Foxconn Technology Group to build a massive display panel factory in the state, a project President Donald Trump touted as a transformational win for the U.S. economy.

Democratic critics, who don't have the votes to stop the incentive package or the project, argued that debate should be delayed so the measure could be improved to add more protections for taxpayers, workers and the environment.

Minority Leader Peter Barca, who represents an area near where the plant is expected to be built in southeast Wisconsin close to the Illinois border, said Republicans hadn't done enough to work with Democrats on improvements.

"Usually if you rush things, FYI, it means the deal stinks," said Democratic Rep. Gordon Hintz, an opponent of the project who noted that Foxconn has made promises to build factories elsewhere and never followed through.

But Republican Assembly Speaker Robin Vos argued that the project that could employ up to 13,000 workers was an "American field of dreams" that will transform the state's economy and should not be passed up.

"I care about the future of our state," Vos said. "We can continue to be naysayers. We can continue to find every fault. We can say, 'Let's not take a chance.'"

The tax breaks up for a vote Thursday would be the largest in state history and the biggest to a foreign company in the U.S.

If built, the plant would be the first outside of Asia for liquid crystal display panels used in television, computers, medicine and other fields.

Republican Gov. Scott Walker, who led negotiations on the deal won by Wisconsin over competition from several other nearby states, has called it a once-in-a-generation opportunity.

The deal signed by Walker and Foxconn officials calls for the electronics giant to invest \$10 billion in the state and hire up to 13,000 people at the massive plant that would be spread over a 20 million-square-foot campus. Construction would begin in 2020.

But critics question where enough trained people for the high-tech work at the plant will come from, given that Wisconsin's unemployment level is 3.1 percent and the state has long suffered from a shortage of skilled workers.

Opponents also point to a wide array of environmental regulations that would be waived under the deal, including the requirement that an environmental impact statement be prepared.

Not all conservatives are on board with the project. The Wisconsin chapter of the conservative group Americans for Prosperity, funded by billionaire brothers Charles and David Koch, came out against the deal as a free market advocate and opponent of government tax incentives.

It will take at least 25 years for Wisconsin taxpayers to break even under the deal, according to an analysis by the nonpartisan Legislative Fiscal Bureau.

Democrats complain the bill is moving too quickly through the Republican-controlled Legislature. Walker and Trump announced that Foxconn was coming to Wisconsin on July 26, and the \$3 billion incentive package was introduced on July 28. The Assembly is voting on it less than three weeks later.

The measure must also clear the Senate, but Republicans there have indicated they may want to make changes. If that happens, the Assembly would have to vote on it again.

Republican Assembly leaders said they expected Democrats to join with them to make it a bipartisan vote to approve the measure.

"On things of this importance, we want to all stand together," Vos said before debate began.

Republicans control the Assembly 64-35.

The agreement with Foxconn calls for the state to approve the incentive package and secure the roughly 1.56 square miles (4.04 square kilometers) of land for the deal by the end of September.

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Citation: Wisconsin Assembly set to approve \$3 billion for Foxconn (2017, August 17) retrieved 20 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2017-08-wisconsin-billion-foxconn.html>

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