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Life After GM: Abandoned Auto Plant in Kalamazoo Humming Again

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SOURCE Southwest Michigan First

KALAMAZOO, Mich., Aug. 24 /PRNewswire/ -- For dozens of communities struggling with what to do with abandoned automotive plants, a lesson or two can be learned from Kalamazoo, Michigan where a former General Motors factory is humming again. The complex, which now houses 13 companies and hundreds of employees, stands in stark contrast to more than 75 manufacturing plants across North America that remain idle since Detroit's Big Three automakers began shuttering operations in 1980.

Kaiser Aluminum has invested more than \$100 million in the Kalamazoo plant where 150 workers are now turning out parts for the aerospace, defense and other industries; Seneca Medical Inc. set up a distribution center for medical and surgical supplies inside the old factory while it builds a new facility on 10 acres it acquired on the campus; numerous smaller companies have leased space; and Candlewood Suites opened a new 95-unit hotel on the site last autumn.

"When General Motors closed the plant in 1999, we had a potential white elephant on our hands," recalled Ron Kitchens, CEO of Southwest Michigan First, the regional economic development agency. "Instead, we viewed it as prime real estate midway between Detroit and Chicago and we moved quickly to capitalize on the opportunity. It's since risen like a phoenix from the ashes."

Southwest Michigan First worked closely with Los Angeles-based Hackman Capital Partners and public and private partners to transform the dilapidated 2.2 million-square-foot facility and the 340 acres surrounding into a start-of-the-art business park. The new owners invested about \$30 million to revamp the massive building, splitting it into two buildings with a truck bay between them, and giving it new lighting, paint and landscaping for better commercial appeal.

Now dubbed Midlink Business Park, the site is bustling with activity with the two buildings about 80% occupied and bulldozers clearing the site for Seneca Medical's new 80,000-square-foot distribution facility. Midlink President David Smith says the park is currently targeting manufacturers that would benefit from being in a Michigan tax-free Renaissance Zone, as well as retailers, restaurants and others to support the cadre of new businesses that now call the old GM plant home.

For details, visit www.southwestmichiganfirst.com.

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