

Our Views: Beloit Ironworks offers Janesville inspiration

It's not naive to hope for a group of smaller manufacturers to move into the GM plant site and gradually expand.
By Gazette Editorial Board

Amid the anger and frustration directed at domestic manufacturers this election season, it's easy to lose sight of success stories in our own backyard.

We're talking about the redevelopment of the Beloit Ironworks complex, and the inspiration it offers Janesville for its shuttered General Motors plant.

The parallels between the two sites extend only so far, but they're intriguing to consider. Beloit Corp., until it closed in 1999, was that city's main employer with as many as 2,000 jobs. It had a giant footprint, occupying a 750,000-square-foot space in the downtown.

Its closure was a blow to the community, just as General Motors' closure devastated Janesville in 2008.

But from the former foundry's ashes has emerged a collection of companies to occupy renovated parts of the facility, which Hendricks Commercial Properties purchased in 2012. Last week, reporter Neil Johnson highlighted those companies whose common bond is high-tech innovation.

Comply365, FatWallet.com and Acculynx are among the firms now operating out of the Ironworks building.

Comply365 was looking for space to grow when Gov. Scott Walker himself contacted Kerry Frank, the company's CEO, and asked her to relocate to Wisconsin. She found what she needed in Beloit, and the software developer now employs 70 people.

In total, the Ironworks complex draws 600 to 700 people to Beloit's downtown.

Naysayers will be quick to point out key differences between the Beloit Ironworks' and General Motors' sites. The GM plant is nearly five times the size of the Ironworks facility, and had nearly 4,000 jobs directly tied to it, either at the plant or nearby suppliers such as Allied Automotive.

Some might argue, too, that the Ironworks site is better suited for tech-based companies with its downtown location, while the GM site is relatively isolated on Janesville's south side.

But not every tech-based company offers online services or makes computer software. Many companies incorporate new technologies into industrial plants to make products such as solar panels and medical devices. Not every employee in the digital economy works from beanbag chairs or plays ping-pong on breaks.

While the idea that a single manufacturer might swoop into and take over the GM site is fanciful, it's not naive to hope for a group of smaller manufacturers to move into the location and gradually expand.

Developers of the Ironworks building hope their tenants grow and eventually fill the building's empty spaces.

"It's easy to get distracted by the idea that you've got this big former industrial space, and that must mean you've got to find big industrial reuses that bring in 200 or 300 new jobs at a time," said Rob Gerbitz, CEO of Hendricks Commercial Properties.

"What's more important maybe isn't the size of the company but the unknown. It's about what might start small

but we know can grow here. That's what inspires this whole project."

The unknown has many Janesville residents and leaders feeling nervous about the future, as GM works toward selecting a developer to buy the 250-acre site.

There are no guarantees the plant will remain standing; it could get demolished to make room for new infrastructure. It could sit vacant for years to come. But based on what happened to Beloit Ironworks, we know revival is possible.