

IN THE NEWS Real estate spotlight: Kenosha hopes to draw entrepreneurs to former Chrysler plant site

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The sprawling former Chrysler plant property in Kenosha has been both a riddle and a place for dreams.

Once a busy production hub that employed 10,000 people in its heyday, the plant closed in 2010 when the auto manufacturer filed for bankruptcy.

Two years later, the city, with the help of state and federal funding, began a \$30 million effort to demolish the buildings and clean up contaminated soil and water on the site.



Now city and business leaders have an ambitious multi-million-dollar plan to transform the 107-acre property, located east of 30th Avenue between 52nd and 60th streets, into the largest innovation-focused, mixed-use development in the state.

"When you look nationally, there have been research parks all over the country, the next stage of those is innovation districts," Tim Casey, director of city development for Kenosha, said of the plan, which calls for 1.5 million square feet of commercial space, green space and 800 to 1,300 apartment units.

Dubbed the Kenosha Innovation Neighborhood, the development would be similar in scale to Drexel Town Square in Oak Creek, Casey said, but "driven by a mission to retain and attract the next generation of people and talent from Kenosha, the region and the world."

City leaders are hoping those entrepreneurs and would-be corporate partners will be drawn to the site by two initial developments: a 60,000-square-foot incubator called the Innovation Center and the new Lakeview Technology Academy building. A Kenosha Unified School District choice high school that has operated in partnership with the Kenosha Area Business Alliance since the late 1990s, the STEM-focused Lakeview is currently located in Pleasant Prairie. Leaders are working to have the campus relocated to the KIN to build a better, bigger building and reach more students in the process.



"The city's vision for the redevelopment of the site is as an innovation neighborhood, so having the area's top-performing school (which happens to have a STEM focus) as one of the anchor tenants for the development seems like a very solid building block and foundational piece," said Todd Battle, president of KABA and vice president of the KUSD school board.

The Innovation Center and school projects received a major financial shot in the arm earlier this month when Gov. Tony Evers announced that \$15 million in stimulus funds would be dedicated for construction efforts there, including \$14 million for the \$25 million Innovation Center and \$1 million for the new Lakeview Technology Academy.

The city already has \$10 million in tax increment financing set aside for the Innovation Center.

In addition to the Innovation Center, which is slated to begin construction later this year or early next year, the city will breathe new life into the site this year with the extension of two major thoroughfares through the property: 52nd Street and 28th Avenue.

Kenosha Mayor John Antaramian, who himself hails from one of the older neighborhoods surrounding the Chrysler property, said the KIN should bolster other redevelopment projects near the site. Those efforts include projects happening in the city's 52nd Street corridor and Uptown neighborhoods, where much of the protests and rioting over the Jacob Blake shooting took place in 2020. The Uptown business district, alone, suffered \$50 million in damages as a result of the civil unrest.

The city recently purchased the Brown Bank Building, at 2216 63rd St. and 6200 23rd Ave., for instance, with plans to turn the structure into a community center. And Madison-area Gorman & Co. has two mixed-use building projects in the works near the KIN – one on 22nd Avenue and another on 23rd Avenue.

According to S.R. Mills, chief executive officer of Kenosha-based Bear Development, the KIN site has plenty of potential to draw interest from private developers. Bear is currently working on a \$1.6 million project to turn the blighted Sun Plaza Shopping Center at 3446 52nd St. into a new home for Kenosha County Human Services/Job Center.

"I think this is a well-thought-out development," Mills said. "It will take some time to have enough economies of scale to attract enough variety of housing, but with a good plan and enough green space, I think it will work."

That's good news for the city, since plans for the neighborhood envision curated retail spaces, like coffee shops and restaurants on the first level of many buildings.

"The mission and the vision of this is next-generation jobs. It is not just another office or industrial park," said Casey.

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