

Your Major Employer Leaves – Now What?

By Steve Vierck, CEcD

NINE STEPS TO ECONOMIC RECOVERY

An increasingly large number of communities are dealing with the loss of one of their major employers. Such closures can be devastating. Fortunately, there are valuable assistance programs in place as well as instructive lessons to be learned from regions that have successfully recovered. This article examines the experiences of four communities impacted by the loss of one of their major employers and offers nine recommendations on ways to help ensure recovery.

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LEAVES – NOW WHAT?

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an increasingly large number of communities and economic development professionals are dealing with the loss of one of their major employers. Within the past five years alone, there have been more than 5400 industrial plant closures across the United States, an average of more than 1000 closures per year according to BuildCentral.com. In addition, more than 400 military installations have been closed through the five rounds of the Base Realignment and Closure Commission (BRAC) process which started in 1989.

The news that a major employer is leaving can send shock waves throughout the community. All for good reason, as the repercussions can be immense, with many jobs and lives adversely affected and the economic future of the entire community often at stake. The so-called “ripple” effect of economic impact from a closure sometimes feels more like a tidal wave.

The loss of jobs and income not only affects the lives of the laid off workers and their families but also reverberates through many other businesses as lower incomes result in fewer purchases. As sales decline and property valuations plummet, tax revenues are slashed. This compression of tax revenues comes right at the time when public resources are most needed. For example, Moraine, Ohio, which experienced the closure of a General Motors plant in 2008, lost roughly one-third of its local income tax collections and has been forced to downsize its city staff.

Many manufacturers, such as automobile assembly facilities, have extensive networks of nearby suppliers that are unable to stay open once their primary customer closes. The Moraine region, with



The Phoenix-Mesa Gateway Airport has emerged from the closure of the former Williams Air Force Base during the 1991 round of BRAC. The airport's scheduled air service has rapidly expanded to almost 1 million passengers annually.

over 90 GM suppliers in 14 Ohio communities, lost over 800 additional jobs at larger suppliers in addition to the 4200 jobs that were lost when General Motors closed. Several companies, such as Jamestown Industries, Johnson Controls, and Plastec closed their local facilities, while others have been forced to downsize.

The following article examines the experiences of four communities impacted through closures and offers nine recommendations on the best ways to recover from the loss of a major employer. Two communities are contending with relatively recent closures – Moraine, Ohio, which had a General Motors assembly plant close a few days before Christmas in 2008, and Parsons, Kansas, which is coping with the shuttering of the Kansas Army Ammunition Plant during the last round of the BRAC process. Its site is transitioning into the 13,727-acre Great Plains Industrial Park.

The other two examples, which are located in Arizona's two largest metropolitan areas, Phoenix

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NINE STEPS TO ECONOMIC RECOVERY

An increasingly large number of communities are dealing with the loss of one of their major employers. Such closures can be devastating. Fortunately, there are valuable assistance programs in place as well as instructive lessons to be learned from regions that have successfully recovered. This article examines the experiences of four communities impacted by the loss of one of their major employers and offers nine recommendations on ways to help ensure recovery.

and Tucson, have had many years to try to develop new economic activity. Phoenix-Mesa Gateway Airport has emerged from the closure of the former Williams Air Force Base during the 1991 round of BRAC. The University of Arizona Science and Technology Park resulted from the closure of most of IBM's Tucson operations and reduction in its workforce from more than 6,000 to less than 800 employees and the acquisition of the company's campus by the University of Arizona in 1994.



The former Kansas Army Ammunition Plant has transitioned into the Great Plains Industrial Park.

1. QUICKLY FORM A RECOVERY LEADERSHIP TEAM - AND THINK REGIONALLY

It is essential to immediately form a strong recovery leadership team. Closures of large facilities often impact large regions, so it is imperative that a regional approach be undertaken with broad regional representation from city, county, and state leadership; economic/community development organizations; education/workforce development; and the private sector. Representatives of state and congressional offices should be on the team as they can access grant funds and other governmental assistance to help rebound from the closures.

It is important to include organizations such as regional foundations that can provide philanthropic resources to assist with the transition. In addition, communities should seek the active involvement of "subject matter experts" with acumen in fields that will be critical to the recovery such as commercial real estate and development, manufacturing, and workforce development.

Moraine and the Dayton region have taken a strong regional approach to the GM plant closure recovery process. According to Michael Davis, the city of Moraine's economic development director, their community has been fortunate "to have a strong consortium of regional partners who realized the importance of not letting the former GM Moraine assembly plant sit idle or be acquired by a metal scrap company leading to demolition." The recovery planning and implementation of initiatives have benefitted from the active participation of the adjacent communities of Dayton, West Carrolton, and Kettering as well as Montgomery County, the Dayton Development Coalition, and the state of Ohio.

Parsons has had to pull together as a community before in order to recover from the 1987 closure of the Katy Rail Shops and a devastating F3 tornado in 2000, which destroyed more than 800 homes and 100 businesses. According to Parsons' economic development director Carolyn Kennett, the lessons that had been learned from responding to the 1987 closure of Union Pacific's Katy Rail Shops have helped the community cope with the Kansas Army Ammunition Plant closure. "We found with the closure of the Katy Rail Shops that quickly starting communication with key people in the community and working with them to develop a plan was very beneficial. Getting buy-in from this group helped develop a war chest for future economic development efforts."

2. PURSUE FUNDING SOURCES FOR EACH STEP ALONG THE WAY

Successfully recovering from a major closure often requires a significant outlay of resources at a time when local revenues may be declining, so it is important to identify and pursue sources of grants, loans, and other resources. These resources can come from all levels of government, businesses, and philanthropic sources such as foundations. Having representation on the recovery leadership team of those potential funders will help with identifying potential funding sources, as well as with gaining "buy-in" to ensure that requests are championed.

There are three main federal funding sources for closed facilities: the Department of Commerce's Economic Development Administration, the Department of Defense's Office of Economic Adjustment and the U.S. Department of Labor.

The Economic Development Administration (EDA) is a primary source of federal funding, with high prioritization awarded to communities affected by employer closures. "Special Needs" regions (which include those suffering from the closure of a major employer) are eligible for both *Public Works Investments* and *Economic Adjustment Assistance Investments*. The EDA investment assistance rate for such projects is usually 50 percent, with a possible additional 30 percent available based on the relative needs of the regions.

FREQUENTLY USED GRANT/FUNDING SOURCES

- Economic Development Administration/
U.S. Department of Commerce
- Office of Economic Adjustment/ U.S. Department of Defense
- U.S. Department of Labor and Local Workforce
Investment Boards
- State Government
- Local Government and Planning Authorities
- Departing Employer
- Regional Foundations
- Purchaser of Facilities

The Public Works Investments can fund activities that seek to either acquire/develop land, or those that improve facilities for use in public works, public service, or other types of developmental facilities. *Economic Adjustment Incentives* are especially relevant for communities experiencing the sudden loss of a major employer and can be used for a variety of tools, including the development of a Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS); expanding the capacities of public officials and EDOs to work with business; assistance with overcoming obstacles identified in the CEDS; or the development of innovative public and private approaches to economic restructuring and revitalization. Completion of a CEDS is generally a requirement for further funding. Moraine, for example, was able to secure 75 percent of its CEDS development funding through the EDA with a “disaster” designation.

The Department of Defense’s Office of Economic Adjustment (OEA) has been the primary source of assistance for many former military facilities. The OEA’s mission is to assist communities impacted by Department of Defense (DOD) changes, including those that result from defense cutbacks and base closures. This includes both financial and technical assistance in providing new employment opportunities and ways of re-using the vacated physical facilities.

OEA has contributed almost \$3 million towards planning and facilities conversion to date to the Phoenix-Mesa Gateway Airport in addition to providing a professional representative who has helped guide the community through the BRAC process. The closure of the former Williams Air Force Base came as a shock to many in the East Valley of the Phoenix metropolitan area when it came in the 1991 round of the Base Realignment and Closure (BRAC) process. Williams had served as the foremost pilot training facility since World War II, graduating more student pilots than any other base in the country and supplying 25 percent of the Air Force’s pilots annually. When it formally closed in 1993, there was a loss of 3800 jobs and \$300 million in economic activity.

The former Air Force base initially needed to establish an Intergovernmental Agreement Group and a Local Redevelopment Authority (LRA), the Williams Gateway Airport Authority, which works with both the Department of Defense and local public and private leaders in preparing and implementing redevelopment plans. An LRA needs to be recognized by OEA in order to receive property and assistance funding.

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The Department of Labor’s Workforce Investment Act provides funding for training programs aimed at creating employment opportunities for adults, youth, and “dislocated” workers (those affected by layoffs). Such funding is allocated to state and local Workforce Investment Boards. In the case of dislocated workers, 60 percent of funds are allocated to local boards and 40 percent are reserved for the state, of which 25 percent must be reserved for rapid response activities. Workforce Investment Boards work through “One Stop Shops” which provide customers with information about and access to a wide variety of job training, education, and employment services. Local and state Workforce Development Boards are good sources of additional assessment and training funds for laid off workers.

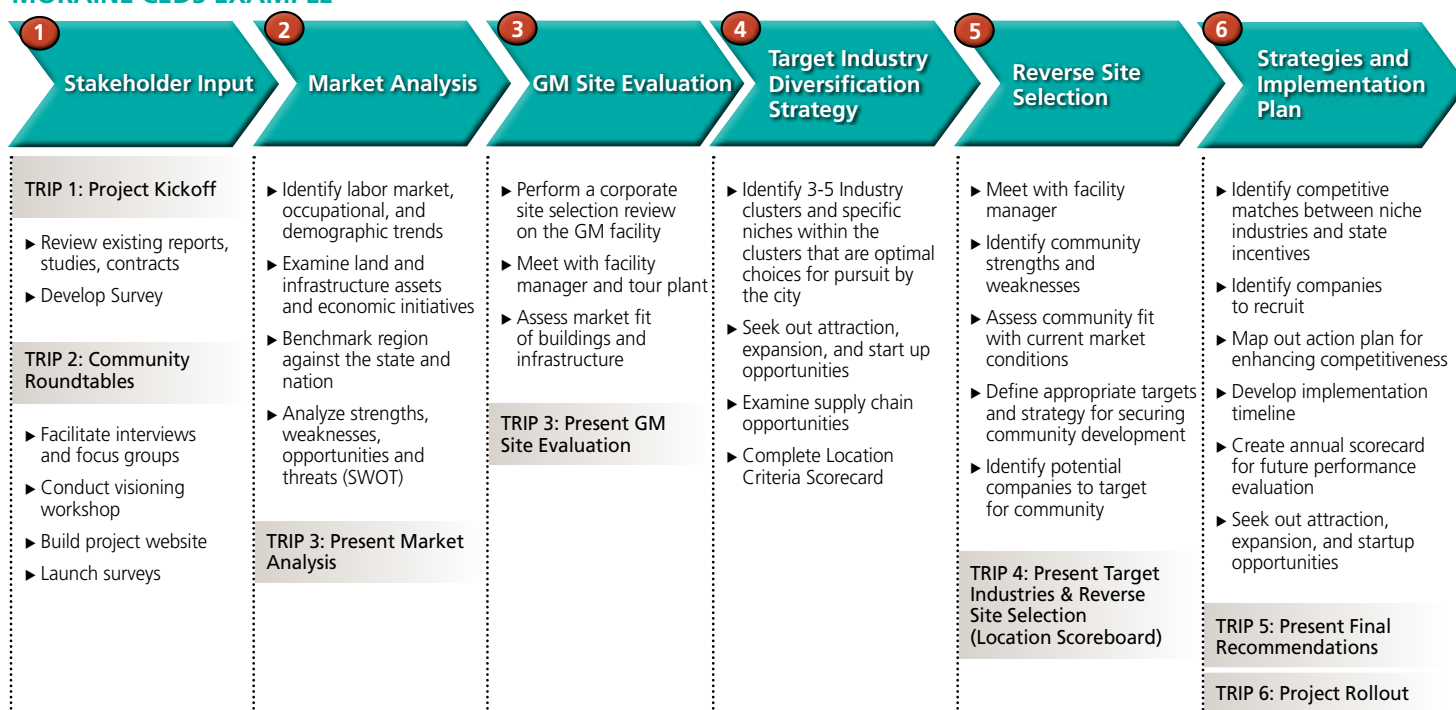


Embraer is one of an increasing number of aircraft service operations located at Phoenix-Mesa Gateway Airport.

Those businesses vacating a facility will sometimes help with recovery costs. Following closure of its Katy Rail Yard, the Union Pacific railroad provided \$1 million in funding to Parsons and Labette County to help with recovery efforts. Some businesses are generous in their support. Others are not supportive beyond any mandated closure notification or support. Intervention of state or federal officials can sometimes be of help in encouraging departing businesses to assist with costs of the recovery. It is not unusual for departing entities to donate their facilities to the community.

Funding and other assistance should be identified for each step in the revitalization process. All three main federal government sources can assist with funding for the development of recovery strategies and action plans while EDA and OEA also provide grants for infrastructure improvements. The DOL and Workforce Development Boards provide grants for workforce assessment and planning as well as retraining to assist laid off workers with the transition to new industries. Local and state governments often support the cost of marketing the impacted region and facility to prospective employers.

MORaine CEDS EXAMPLE



Source: AngelouEconomics and Foote Consulting; Moraine, Ohio Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy

3. COLLABORATIVELY DEVELOP A STRONG PLAN OF ATTACK

An effective Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS) can provide a game plan to ultimate success and is often required in order to receive certain types of federal funding. Development of a CEDS should broadly engage the community and affected parties in assessing the situation and identifying solutions. According to Phoenix-Mesa Gateway's director, Lynn Kusey, the strategy needs to "have a long range vision that resonates with leadership."

An example of the framework used by AngelouEconomics and Foote Consulting in working with the community and region on developing the Moraine/Greater Dayton regional CEDS is shown above. The strategic economic development planning approach generally follows these major steps:

- Stakeholder Input,
- Market Analysis,
- Target Industry Identification,
- Strategies and Implementation Plan, and
- Performance Measures.

Several additional facets that are often employed in communities recovering from closures include in-depth facility assessment, a reverse site selection exercise to evaluate facility and regional appropriateness for certain types of economic development projects, detailed workforce assessment and identification of specific companies that could be appropriate fits for the vacated site or building.

Bruce Wright, University of Arizona associate vice president for economic development and chief operating officer of the University of Arizona Science and Technology Park, said that although developing their reuse planning entailed a "huge upfront investment," it was a valuable one that has "served the park well over the years."

Carolyn Kennett summed up the approach that Parsons took: "Getting an accurate evaluation of our potential, an initial baseline assessment was completed. From that assessment, target industries were recommended based on current industry trends, the strengths of our existing industries, and the community's vision. Recommendations and action strategies partnered the city of Parsons with the Great Plains Development Authority, creating a synergy that could strengthen the region. With combined efforts, we can focus our recruitment on recommended target industries, build and expand on the existing industrial base, and expand our entrepreneurship program."

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The evaluation of any impacted region needs to be frank in its assessment of the region's competitive advantages and disadvantages as this is the starting point from which recommendations are developed. It is important to think outside of the box. For instance, the CEDS process revealed that the Great Plains Industrial Park is notable not only for its prime industrial space, but also as a nature lover's paradise with hunting and fishing tourism potential that is now being capitalized upon through tourism marketing. Over 3,000 acres have been set aside for the Kansas Department of Wildlife and Parks, and deer and turkey have been allowed to thrive for the last 50 years. Native prairie grasses and wild flowers surround wetlands and 162 fishing ponds.

4. DO A FRANK ASSESSMENT OF THE FACILITY AND TAKE CORRECTIVE ACTION TO MAKE IT "MARKET READY"

There are a large and growing number of vacated industrial, commercial, and military facilities on the market. Hence, it is crucial to frankly assess the condition and market readiness of the site and buildings in order to best position the vacated site for desirable projects. According to Deane Foote of Foote Consulting, "Availability of large industrial buildings will continue to rise and prices will fall as supply continues to outpace demand due to the still sluggish economy. Specialized facilities that are properly priced, match growth target company needs, and are in good shape will have the best potential for sale or lease in this uncertain market."

To help facilitate an expeditious evaluation of the facility, even if it is still occupied, Michael Davis of Moraine emphasizes working closely with the departing employer. "Our historically strong relationship with GM played a significant role in our efforts to keep momentum in the reutilization and acquisition and the ultimate success of having the facility in a private developer's hands within 2 ½ years from the date of closure."

An objective "reverse site selection" exercise was conducted which favorably compared the former GM facility and other community attributes with those provided by other communities containing vacated automotive plants. The plant site was recently acquired by the Industrial Realty Group (IRG), which is conducting an in-depth assessment of the property. Redevelopment is preferable to demolition for Davis and Moraine. "By having the facility owned by an experienced and successful industrial redeveloper, our region is in a position to offer a site with extremely low pricing and all existing infrastructure."

Market-based reuse generally involves some combination of demolition, modification, and new construction,

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The Moraine, Ohio, site formerly occupied by General Motors was recently purchased by the Industrial Realty Group (IRG), which is conducting an in-depth assessment of the 386-acre site.

as well as the provision of new or upgraded infrastructure. Phoenix-Mesa Gateway Airport needed to make substantial investments in infrastructure, including construction of an access road and water and sewer improvements, in order to successfully redevelop the site. Along with filling most of the vacated buildings on the former base, it has also supported the construction of 17 new buildings by the private sector on land leased by the LRA.

Older industrial facilities may not be attractive to current users as characteristics that were once very common, such as low ceiling height and multiple floors, are not conducive to modern operations. However, vacated buildings often contain valuable equipment and features that are too expensive to move but of substantial value to certain industries. Overhead cranes, reinforced floors, rail sidings, and telecommunications infrastructure are examples. Equipment left behind is often applicable to a far wider array of industries beyond that of the departing company.

5. LOOK FOR CROSS-CUTTING COMPETENCIES OF LAID-OFF WORKERS AND MARKET THOSE “STRANDED” WORKFORCE SKILLS WHICH ARE TRANSFERABLE TO EMERGING INDUSTRIES

Many regions don't fully capitalize upon the skills of the laid off workers, even though those skills can often be a powerful lure for replacement employers. Sometimes the best “re-employment” opportunities are found within other industries that require similar skills. For instance, the graph below depicts many of the skills found in the automotive industry that are readily transferable to the clean energy industry.

Brevini, an Italian corporation with a long history in the renewable energy field, took advantage of this skill transferability. It had a pressing need for workers familiar with gear box production for application to the manufacturing of wind turbines. They found ample expertise in place in Muncie, Indiana, a long-time center of automotive gear box development and production, which had lost employment opportunities due to the decline of the automotive industry. Brevini opened a production facility there and plans to hire 450 workers at an average salary exceeding \$45,000.

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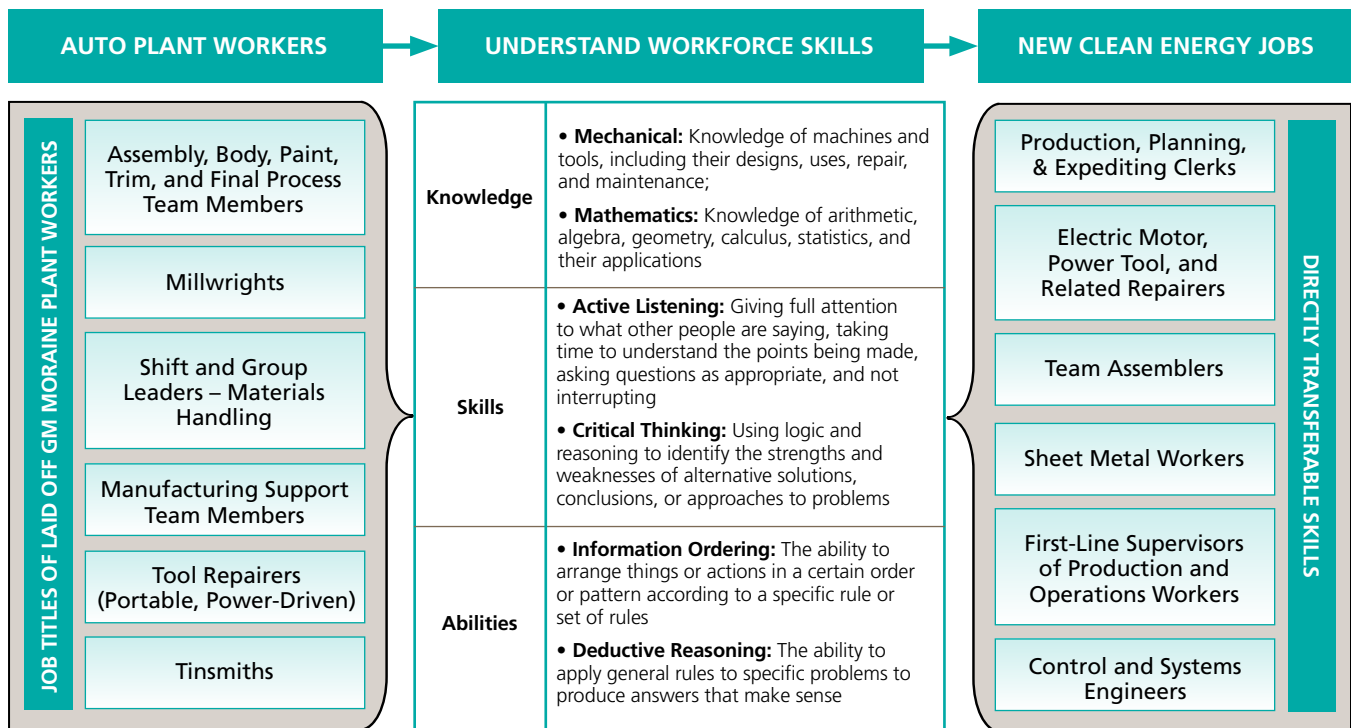
The U.S. Department of Labor and local Workforce Development Boards have substantial funding to assist with the transition of laid off workers into emerging industries. These funds can be used for the assessment as well as the education and training of laid-off workers. “Retooling” of the workforce is often critical to the success of any recovery effort.

6. UNDERSTAND WHAT INDUSTRIES ARE EXPANDING WITHIN THE REGION AND THE COMPETITION INCLUDING SIMILAR VACANT FACILITIES

With so much at stake, it is imperative for impacted communities to understand in depth the market for the types of projects locating and expanding within the region. Yet some communities are oblivious to market trends and changing opportunities. It is important for impacted communities to carefully research the types of businesses that have been locating facilities within their region as well as their specific facility requirements. It is revealing to map these locations in order to better discern those industries which favor locations similar to that of the impacted community, i.e. industries which locate in smaller rural communities versus metropolitan areas.

Conway Data is one source of such economic development locations information. The industry analysis table, which is based on Conway Data information, shows

WORKFORCE SKILLS TRANSFERABILITY EXAMPLE



Source: AngelouEconomics, Moraine Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy

that even in the first two quarters of 2009, a period with a drastically reduced level of economic development activity, there were still opportunities for Parsons and the Great Plains Industrial Park judging from locations within the surrounding four-state region.

It is also important for impacted communities to identify the competition for projects including those communities that can offer similar vacant facilities and the attributes of those facilities.

7. BE CREATIVE ABOUT REUSE OPPORTUNITIES

A multitude of diverse economic development uses have gone into the sites and facilities left behind by departing employers including research and development, manufacturing, higher education/technical training, incubators, distribution, retail, and customer service centers. Impacted regions should look for traditional *and* non-traditional users that would benefit from the special assets of the site and region.

Consideration should be given to those emerging industries resulting from convergence of one or more target industries as these often are areas of special competitive strength. For instance, the historically-strong acumen of Moraine and the Dayton area in advanced materials, machining, and aerospace lends itself well to emerging industries such as wind turbine and unmanned airborne vehicles development.

Examples of successful facility reuse have frequently involved drastic change in usage from the previous tenant. Gene DePrez of Global Innovator Partners cites the example of the transformation of the former New England Confectionary Company (NECCO) candy manufacturing plant in Cambridge, Massachusetts, into the

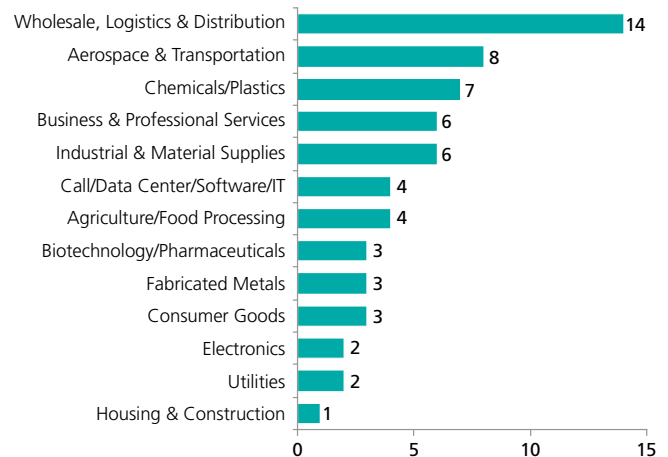


The University of Arizona Science and Technology Park is home to 43 companies and organizations with over 7,000 employees.

PARSONS EXPANDING INDUSTRY ANALYSIS

FOUR-STATE REGION LOCATIONS AND EXPANSIONS

Locations/Expansions In KS, MO, NE, OK, 2009 - Qtr. 1 & 2



Source: AngelouEconomics analysis of Conway Data New Plants data base

Novartis Institutes for Biomedical Research world headquarters. More than 3,000 scientists and technologists are now employed there.

The University of Arizona Science and Technology Park has successfully developed over time a diverse range of employers with heavy emphasis on technology and entrepreneurship. The former IBM campus has grown from two tenants and 1,200 employees to 43 companies and business organizations with over 7,000 employees. It seeks to "support high technology companies in all phases of development" according to Bruce Wright. Its tenant base includes a diverse range of employers including four Fortune 500 companies (Canon USA, Citigroup, IBM and Raytheon) and many emerging technology companies such as NP Photonics, and DILAS Diode Laser. It also houses the Arizona Center for Innovation, a technology business incubator which has incubated almost 50 companies since 2003.

SELECTED UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY PARK TENANTS

- **Raytheon Missile Systems** – engineering, finance, supply chain and sub-assembly of missile systems
- **Citigroup** – global financial services support center
- **IBM** – storage development, global services, and software
- **NP Photonics** – single-frequency fiber lasers and ASEs
- **DILAS Diode Laser** – high power diode laser manufacturer
- **EMCORE Solar Arizona** – high-efficiency CPA array systems for utility and large scale commercial solar power generation facilities
- **First Light LLC** – utility-scale solar project developer
- **Aria International** – surveillance and communications equipment and solutions



The recently opened 200-acre "Solar Zone" at the Science and Technology Park will provide solar energy, house solar companies, and serve as a leading center of research and education about renewable energies.

The Park contributes approximately \$3 billion annually to Pima County's economy and is one of southern Arizona's largest employment hubs. It recently opened "The Solar Zone," a 200-acre center that will provide the Science and Technology Park with solar energy, house solar companies, serve as a leading center of industry research, and raise education about and awareness of renewable energies. Bell Independent Power Corporation will construct a 5-MW solar plant with a thermal storage system that will be the first of its kind in the world.

Phoenix-Mesa Gateway Airport is developing into an international aerospace center with more than 35 companies in aircraft maintenance, modification, testing, and pilot training. One specific area of concentration is as an aircraft service center with tenants Embraer, Cessna, and Hawker-Beechcraft. A major competitive draw for the service centers is the aircraft maintenance programs offered by Chandler-Gilbert Community College, another Airport tenant.

The former Air Force base has developed into a major educational center with Arizona State University's Polytechnic Campus and its more than 10,000 students serving as a significant asset for employers. The former base has also capitalized upon its three long runways to become a reliever airport to Phoenix Sky Harbor International Airport with rapidly expanding utilization. Allegiant Air provides scheduled commercial service to 27 cities with more than 900,000 passengers annually.

8. AGGRESSIVELY MARKET TO TARGETED INDUSTRIES AND SPECIFIC COMPANIES

Unfortunately, impacted communities often follow up strong planning efforts with weak implementation and marketing for replacement employers. It is imperative to not only identify target industries but also specific companies within those industries (note the depiction of that screening process on the right) and to connect to them through a proactive marketing program. This requires ensuring that adequate personnel and other resources

are in place to aggressively communicate both regional and facility message points to prospective companies. A long range effort needs to be put in place as recovery efforts can take a long time.

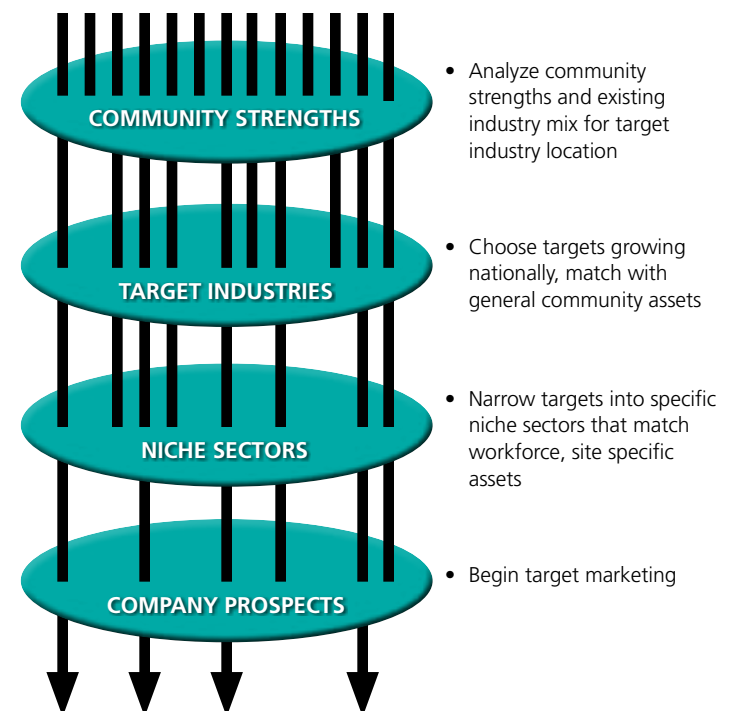
If the facility is privately owned, the property owner and leasing agents are natural allies for external marketing initiatives. Effective relationship marketing programs should also focus on decision influencers such as site consultants and tenant representative brokers that concentrate on the types of projects targeted within the strategy. Local brokers can help to gain national/international exposure through their national networks.

Sometimes opportunities are present to quickly re-fill the facility and should be vigorously pursued with in-depth research, aggressive marketing, and innovative incentive programs.

The state of Delaware responded expeditiously to the closure of a Valero refinery in Delaware City by supporting the acquisition of the refinery by another group. This is an example where the replacement employer will directly benefit from the skill sets of the dislocated workers.

Marketing and support to existing businesses and entrepreneurs through retention and expansion programs should not be neglected. Business start-ups can replace many of the lost jobs from the closure, building

TARGET INDUSTRY AND COMPANY SELECTION



Source: AngelouEconomics

upon the acumen of laid off employees who choose to remain within the region. Many existing businesses are severely stressed by the major firm's closure and support to them needs to be increased. With appropriate support, some firms will successfully maneuver into new markets. This has been the case in Moraine where some automotive suppliers have successfully transitioned into other markets such as aerospace, composite materials, and medical equipment.

9. DISPLAY OPTIMISTIC LEADERSHIP ... AND PERSIST!

Positive leadership is crucial when dealing with challenges such as that presented by the closure of a major employer. The shock of the closure combined with uncertainty about the future often fosters pessimism. In such environments, positive leadership can provide the spark for communities to move forward. Not all the answers will be known, but a shared sense of purpose and hope is a critical starting point for any recovery.

Persistence has been a key to Phoenix-Mesa Gateway Airport's development. Air cargo was initially one of its primary target industries but did not develop as hoped due to shifts in global logistics markets. Fortunately, other areas such as aircraft modification and servicing and passenger air service have grown. Due to economic conditions and market shifts, some areas of economic opportunity will grow and others will diminish over time. It is important to retain flexibility and responsiveness to new opportunities. According to Lynn Kusey, it is important to "keep the big vision, but stay flexible on the details."

PUT IT ALL TOGETHER AND MOVE FORWARD

Successful economic recovery often takes a long time, so a realistic and commonly shared sense of purpose, approach, and timing is important. Speed and focus are critical with the need to expeditiously form a regional recovery leadership team, identify appropriate funding sources, and jointly develop a strong plan of attack. Frank market-based assessment of both the facility and workforce should accurately pinpoint key differentiating assets. Planning and implementation need to be focused on real market requirements gained through in-depth assessment of market opportunities as well as understanding of the competition for desirable projects. Positive leadership can often provide the spark to help turn the situation around.

The closure of a major employer can be devastating to a community. Fortunately, there are many valuable programs and other resources in place to assist with the transition. There are instructive lessons that can be learned from communities that have successfully recovered and generated new economic activity far in excess of what was lost. 🌐

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