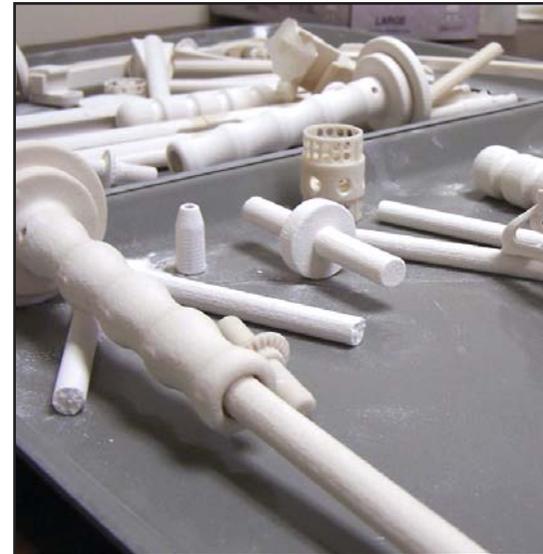


The second structural steel rolling mill at Steel Dynamics is scheduled to begin operating in the first quarter of 2008.



## Thriving on Change

### Community Embraces Industrial, Retail Growth

By **Symone Salisbury**

**S**ongwriter Bob Dylan may have been referring to the revolutionary 1960s when he mused that “The times they are ‘a changing,’” but the lyrics could apply to Columbia City. It may not be Indiana’s largest city (with a population of approximately 8,000), but its community leaders are committed to adapting the area to remain on the cutting edge of technology and enhance the quality of life for residents.

Several factors work in Columbia City’s favor: lower business operating costs, little crime and proximity to major commerce areas, including Fort Wayne, South Bend and Warsaw. Among challenges are attracting additional downtown entertainment venues and replacing businesses that close or relocate to other cities.

Two new investments at Steel Dynamics, Inc. (SDI), a national manufacturing company with its structural and rail division based in Columbia City, are bringing additional attention to the community. First, it is constructing a \$200 million rolling mill (the second at the facility) that will increase steel production to two million tons annually. The project is anticipated to create 150 jobs. Next, SDI will add a second casting operation at the Columbia City plant that will boost the total finished steel output to two million tons each year and add 50 jobs.

Another leading manufacturer is Micropulse, Inc. Specializing in the manufacturing of medical devices, surgical instruments and orthopedic implants, it has a history of adeptly responding to changing economic trends by modifying its focus.

“I never relied on the climate to be successful,” stresses Micropulse founder and president Brian Emerick. “I just went out and made it happen. Typically that’s what you have to do. You can’t read the newspaper and say ‘I can’t start a business because this or that is happening.’ I think there are probably more opportunities for entrepreneurs today.”

#### Meeting the challenge

Micropulse began in Emerick’s garage in 1988 as a small tool and die business. It has become one of Northeast Indiana’s true success stories.

“I started out with Computer Numerically Controlled (CNC) electrical discharge machining, which was a relatively new service,” Emerick recalls. “We were just a job shop that was doing tool and die type work and taking overflow work from a lot of other businesses (regardless of their industry).”

The majority of Micropulse’s business centered on orthopedics in its first decade, but also



**Hands-on leadership from Brian Emerick (center) has contributed to Micropulse's success, as has technology such as computer-generated test devices (left) and advanced machinery.**

included automotive services. The latter area was expanded during the mid-1990s to match industry growth in the region. A few years later, the company changed its concentration when international trade relations with China became more prominent and manufacturing plants began to close across the country.

"We had probably 10 or 12 customers' plants close that we were doing substantial business with," he states. "We were faced with the reality of change or die. So we focused on an area of our business (medical) that had always been pretty good to us."

At the forefront of Micropulse's success is Emerick's commitment to employees. Along with recruiting experienced staff members, he offers developmental programs for entry-level workers and partners with local colleges to provide internship and co-op opportunities.

"I started the first year of co-ops in 1992 and (many of) those students are still with me today," he comments. "Several of them have positions of leadership and responsibility."

Micropulse also will add jobs for a new 40,000-square-foot facility. The expansion will be complete by spring 2008.

## A taste of retail

John Hostetler and his wife first became acquainted with Columbia City through a relative living nearby. Impressed by the town's cultural and commercial climate, they relocated to the area and opened CC Deli in July.

Launching the eatery meant a career change for John, who had spent most of his professional life as a mechanical engineer in Fort Wayne. Their first foray into the bakery business was managing Busco Bakery in Churubusco for eight months. Although they value its role in preparing them for their current venture, they consider Columbia City a more ideal location.

"We felt that it really would be better here," Hostetler asserts. "I don't think in Churubusco there's any place that would have the people, the flow that you can get here."

"I think probably the best thing about this city is that it's on the cusp of changing and becoming more focused on smaller businesses. I think there's going to be a focus to bring more interesting shops in and that you're going to see more entertainment."

One way the county addressed the need for additional





**The new downtown County Government Center is expected to positively impact nearby retail businesses.**

retail businesses was building a new downtown County Government Center building, which will increase demand for restaurants, shopping venues and more.

Contributing to the city's appeal is the all-inclusive structure of downtown businesses. "It's very busy and it's all self-contained," Hostetler points out. "I can't think of another city that's like that."

He contends that the vitality of Columbia City's downtown and its importance to the city rivals that of much larger communities.

### County hospital: new and improved

Touted as a "patient-centered" campus, the new \$40-\$45 million Parkview Whitley Hospital facility will offer private rooms for all patients, and comprehensive outpatient and emergency department services. The campus will stand at the intersection of U.S. 30 and State Road 205.

"Their delivery systems have changed, so the new hospital will be very state-of-the-art," explains Lowell Teska, president of the Whitley County Economic Development Corporation. "It (the former facility) was a good hospital, but the mainframe for inpatient services was built in the 1950s and has become outdated."

He adds that the new site will offer easier access and visibility than the current downtown Columbia City location. Construction will begin in 2008, with the facility scheduled to open in mid-2010.

### Small town advantages

Many individuals consider Columbia City's small size and rural setting a benefit rather than a barrier.

"A lot of people have come from a farming or agricultural background, and a majority of the people who have that type of background are very creative," Hostetler suggests. "People know how to get the job done, and I think they take ownership in that."

Emerick also lauds Columbia City's small town appeal.

"We don't see any challenges (in terms of the town's location)," he declares. "We draw employees from a 40-mile radius. If I was in Warsaw with all of those other big companies, I would be competing with my own customers for employees and that's not a good situation. We like our situation because we're drawing

from a lot of small communities around here."

Jim Farber, Flow-Tech Plumbing & Heating co-owner, as well as secretary and treasurer, agrees.

"We're not a real small community, but being able to deal with a lot of the customers directly and being able to see them on a regular basis (is an advantage)," he says. "There is a lot more one-on-one business."

He admits, however, that business closings during the last decade have prompted Flow-Tech to also work with companies "outside of the county to pick up the slack."

### Attracting industry

Whitley County boasts two industrial parks on Highway 30: Armstrong Office Park (built on the northern edge of the city) and the Park 30 Business Center (situated on the outskirts of Columbia City toward Fort Wayne). Both are designed to host small and large businesses.

Park 30 has been designated by the state as a shovel ready site, which means that it has been pre-certified as ready for industrial development. The draw to potential businesses is that it reduces the often time consuming permit review and zoning processes.

In addition, Park 30 is located within Whitley County's Tax Increment Financing (TIF) district, which helps provide funding for industrial projects. Teska notes that Whitley County's TIF district is the state's largest.

"Whitley County is now considering the development of more business TIF districts along the Highway 30 corridor and throughout the rest of the county," he reveals. "Such areas will continue to emphasize the ability to fully provide shovel ready sites. We want to make it as easy as possible for businesses to relocate here."

The Northeast Indiana Regional Marketing Partnership also works to attract businesses to the region and to help those already in the area expand. It consists of representation from economic development corporations in 11 counties collaborating to optimize marketing opportunities for the region.

"Northeast Indiana has a lot of resources to draw upon and this is one of the ways to do it," reflects Jim Argerbright, chairman of the Whitley County EDC board of directors. "Small rural counties only have so many dollars to spend to market their counties, but when you work together, there's a lot more buying power."

"We want every business that has or will be relocating here to feel the partnership the county has with business," Teska declares. "We want every business that moves to Whitley County to think that was a good move. We not only want you to survive, but we want you to survive in Whitley County."

#### INFORMATION LINK

**Resources:** Lowell Teska, Whitley County Economic Development Corporation, at (260) 244-5506 or [www.whitleybiz.com](http://www.whitleybiz.com)

Brian Emerick, Micropulse, at (260) 625-3304 or [www.micropulseinc.com](http://www.micropulseinc.com)

John Hostetler, CC Deli, at (260) 248-4700