

SPECIAL REPORT: Industrial park open for business



By Dan Dakin, For Postmedia Network
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George Morrell welds an aftermarket Corvette frame at Collier Technologies on Progress St. in the Stanley Ave. Business Park. More than 1,000 people are employed by 58 different companies in this industrial area of Niagara Falls. MIKE DIBATTISTA NIAGARA FALLS REVIEW

Niagara - We have the falls. We have golf courses, casinos and hotels. We have Marineland.

There's no denying this is a tourist town.

But tucked away in the city's south end, out of view from the hotels and the well-manicured parks land along the Niagara River is a one-square-kilometre piece of property that represents more than 1,000 jobs and a healthy non-tourism industry.

Thirty years ago, city officials wanted to create a centralized area for light and heavy industrial use.

They purchased land along Stanley Ave. south of Marineland Pkwy. and then sold off individual plots to businesses at discounted rates.

The idea was simple: encourage new companies to build in Niagara Falls and existing companies to move to one area.

"We were probably one of the first ones in here," said Nick Morganelli, whose dad Antonio opened Stelfab Niagara in 1972. "Within a few months of each other everyone started building."

Oneida Canada was one of the anchor buildings at Stanley Ave. and Don Murie St., employing hundreds of people in its silverware manufacturing plant.

The Stanley Ave. Business Park continued to grow and by the late 1980s, more than 2,000 people were employed there. Some manufacturers had massive workforces like Edscha of Canada, which employed 500 at its peak.

But this story isn't about what the Stanley Ave. Business Park was. Because the days of manufacturing being Niagara's big industry are long gone. If Edscha's opening in 1987 was an example of the industrial park's height of success, its closing in 2009 represented a low point, when more than 200 people were permanently laid off.

NEW INDUSTRY

Julie Wilson was looking for a new home for the embroidery and promotional goods company she owns with Buddy Lowe. They had been operating Hangups Sportswear out of a building on Montrose Rd., but they needed room to grow and found what they were looking for in the form of an empty building on Kister Rd., one of four streets in the Stanley Ave. park.

In October, they moved into a 10,000-square-foot building, bringing another eight employees to the area.

"Part of the reason we came out here was because this was a newer building and the price was really good," Wilson said.

Without the tainted view of seeing the park through some dark days of closed businesses and laid-off employees, Wilson feels things are looking up.

"The neighbours are friendly and positive. Sometimes you drive down the streets here and you can't believe the cars. It's a good vibe," she said.

A business with eight employees might not compare to companies that once employed hundreds, but the resurgent growth in the park over the past two years has largely been thanks to those smaller businesses.

BY THE NUMBERS

Over the past two weeks, The Review surveyed every company in the park and found there are 1,063 people working at 58 businesses. There are 66 buildings or individual units available on the park's four streets, meaning occupancy currently sits at 88%.

Of those 58 businesses, 33% have five or fewer employees, 30% have 6-20 and 30% have 21-50. Only 7% have more than 50 employees.

"In today's economy, 95% of it is driven by small- to mid-sized businesses. That's reflected in the park and in some of the businesses that have opened up," said Serge Felicetti, the director of business development for the City of Niagara Falls.

Looking at the types of work being done in the park, 42% would be considered manufacturing, 18% are sales or administration and 18% are service businesses. The remaining 22% are either warehousing or contractors.

While manufacturing takes the biggest piece of the pie, the companies in that category are certainly diverse. Produced in the Stanley Ave. park is everything from replacement Corvette frames to chicken wings. From recycling bins to custom wooden bars. From fence posts to paper products.

"Not many people know we're out here. It's very much forgotten about," said Larry Vaughan, vice-president of Ground Aerial Maintenance Services on Earl Thomas Ave. "We've seen businesses come and go, but traditionally something leaves and something else buys the building and comes in."

Though all of the land in the industrial park is now privately owned, when new businesses approach the city, Felicetti and his staff show them what options are available.

"There are some buildings that are available, so we try to make people be aware of them. We have our new Montrose Park, which we're also promoting. It depends on what they're looking for," he said.

Though not new, the Montrose Park is the modern version of the Stanley Ave. Business Park.

Around 1990, the city bought land on the west side of the QEW in an area bordered by Kalar Rd. and Montrose Rd. to the west and east, and Browns Rd. and Chippawa Creek Rd. to the north and south.

The only two occupants in what's known as the Montrose Business Park are Alo North America and Star Warning Systems, two businesses that outgrew their buildings in the Stanley Ave. park and built new on Montrose.

The fact that the former locations of both businesses in the Stanley Ave. park are occupied again is a good sign.

"It's evolving and changing with the business climate," Felicetti said of the park. "It's healthy in the sense that there's not much land left, so it's about pushing and working with the businesses that are there."

Dave Allan, who owns Marine Clean Ltd. in the park and heads up an informal association of the area businesses, said he also sees the park adapting.

"The business coming and going is related to the economy changing and pressure from overseas," he said. "Some of the support businesses for the auto industry were hit. But with the resurgence of the auto and steel industries, we're seeing companies come back."

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