

Projects Show Resilient Spirit of Decatur, Ala.



Independence Tube has answered the devotion of its Decatur employees by devoting itself to the complete rebuilding of its metal service center, above. The previous center was destroyed by a tornado on April 27, 2011 (below). The \$35-million facility is 95 percent complete.

When the devastating tornadoes of 2011 ripped through northern Alabama last spring, they left more than a trail of destruction in their wake.

They set in motion a series of events that would illustrate the remarkable resilience of a local economy.

That resilience would pay off in the form of 13 corporate facility projects in Decatur, Ala., the No. 1 U.S. metropolitan area among communities with a population of 200,000 or less. Decatur in Morgan County edged out second-place Springfield, Ohio, which registered 12 projects in 2011.

“There is an excitement in our community that is infectious,” says Wally Terry, director of economic and community development for the City of Decatur. “We have a heart within our work force that wants to create a product that is world-class.”

That heart was never more evident than in the wake of the April 27 tornadoes that tore through northern Alabama, killing 248 people throughout the region. Among the properties lost was the brand new expansion facility of Independence Tube Corp. in Decatur.

“Thank God that all of our people escaped injury,” says Rick Werner, president of Independence Tube. “Our building was substantially destroyed and needed to be almost completely rebuilt. We rotated workers from Decatur to expand our work force in Illinois by over 30 people, which allowed us to increase our production capacity and try to take care of our customers. They left their families to support our customers. What more can you ask of them?”

The remaining work force in Decatur assisted in the building demolition and rebuilding, asset preservation and shipping. “Since the tornado, only three Decatur employees have left our company,” Werner says.

The replacement facility — a \$35-million metal service center — is 95 percent complete and started running mill trials in early February. “We anticipate running to a production schedule within months,” says Werner. “Both the city and the Morgan County Economic Development Association were onsite the day after the tornado struck and were extremely helpful on this project.”

Work force and community assistance played a big role in helping Decatur and Morgan County land several large-scale investments last year.

Polyplex Corp., an India-based company that announced a \$185-million plastic film plant in Decatur, will create 150 new jobs in the area.

“We were looking to be closer to a raw material source, and the area needed an established industrial base,” says Jeff Hudspeth, plant manager of Polyplex in Decatur. “We looked at several states including Georgia, South Carolina, Tennessee and Alabama before selecting the site in Decatur.”

The 160,000-sq.-ft. (14,864-sq.-m.) plant will be operational by the third quarter of this year and employ up to 150 workers upon full production.

“The work force in the Decatur area is very well trained,” Hudspeth says. “Because there are similar industries in the area, the people here have the experience we need. And everyone from the City of Decatur to the Morgan County EDA and the State of Alabama has been very helpful in providing support. They have been superb.”

Access to major highways and the Tennessee River also helps Polyplex gain an advantage in logistics, notes Hudspeth. “This area has an extensive infrastructure and it is very supportive of industry,” he adds. “It is a place that should be in a company’s consideration if it is seeking a new Southern industrial location.”

Dan Caughran, director of production operations and Decatur site leader for United Launch Alliance, concurs. “As the nation’s rocket company, ULA is proud to have a major presence in Decatur,” he says. “Our choice of Decatur for our production facilities has helped ULA meet and exceed our commitments to the U.S. government in annual savings.”

The company has added 150 jobs in the community of Trinity over the past year. The new workers are making evolved expandable launch vehicles at the ULA plant.

“Decatur is an ideal location logistically, with great access the waterways that provide us the ability to deliver our rockets via the Delta Mariner to Cape Canaveral in Florida and Vandenberg Air Force Base in California,” says Caughran. “The greater Decatur community and the economic development teams in Morgan County have been invaluable in supporting our efforts, especially in helping our employees move to the area with their families.”

Jeremy Nails, president and CEO of the Morgan County EDA, says his area received more than \$416 million in corporate facility project announcements last year.

“Historically, we rank in the top five in the state in capital investment numbers and in the top 10 in the state in jobs created annually,” Nails says. “Our labor comes from throughout all of Northern Alabama. We are fortunate to have the amount of companies that we have here, providing jobs for the people who live here.”



Photos courtesy of Morgan County EDA

SITE Selection