

Stoughton Trailers development project aims to benefit community, attract more workers

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— The head of Stoughton Trailers says a new corporate headquarters and community park project will attract more workers to the local community.

In a recent interview, President and CEO Bob Wahlin said the company aims to be “more of a destination employer” in the years to come. He said the project will help to “separate us from some of the employment competition, and really try to set us up to bring in the best people in our industry to Stoughton.”

Stoughton Trailers is a family-owned business that makes semitrailers, chassis and other transportation equipment. As one of the largest private manufacturers in Wisconsin, the company has eight production sites across multiple states totaling about 2 million square feet of space. Along with facilities in Stoughton, Evansville and Brodhead, Stoughton Trailers has also recently established operations in Texas and Mississippi.

The company has seen significant growth over the past decade, Wahlin explained, and employs more than 1,800 people. Its current home office building has been in use since 1961, when the company began operations in Stoughton.

Stoughton Trailers today is rolling out its plans for a new headquarters building to be located on a nearby 182-acre plot. The plans also include space for commercial and residential developments, athletic spaces, an amphitheater, a pond, trails for walking and biking and plenty of green space.

“Beyond the office building, I’m hoping again the community park can be something that distinguishes Stoughton from some of the other communities,” Wahlin told WisBusiness.com. “We know it’s not going to be a silver bullet, but it can be a great part of Stoughton, and one of the many positive things that’ll bring people to this community.”

He said Stoughton Trailers has begun initial outreach to get other businesses involved in the project, noting he expects many local companies would love to give back to the community in this way. But first, the city is conducting a needs analysis to better understand how the park should look.

Daniele Thompson, an attorney with St. Marie Law LLC in Stoughton, is the project manager. She said the city has retained an outside consultant to engage with stakeholders including sports coaches, schools and others in the community. The analysis is also looking at traffic and visitor spending patterns. Results of that study will be released in March, Thompson said.

“One of the things that we will be going to the community for will be opening a new tax incremental district,” she said. “So what we’ll look for is buy-in from the community on a [tax incremental financing] perspective.”

Tax incremental financing is a strategy commonly used by municipal governments to encourage private development, according to an overview from the Wisconsin Policy Forum. Under this financing tool, public funds can help pay for project costs within a designated area. WPF says municipalities often borrow money for this purpose and pay it back with the increased property tax revenues from the new development.

Wahlin said the company is “pushing hard” to be able to move into the new headquarters by the end of 2024, but added a lot of work needs to be done to make that a reality.

“We understand that’s an aggressive goal, but that’s our goal nonetheless,” he said.

— While efforts on the headquarters and park project continue, Stoughton Trailers is also working to upgrade its manufacturing operations with more automation.

About 10 years ago, the company set out a strategic growth plan that Wahlin describes as a “grow or die philosophy.” Since that time, he says Stoughton Trailers has worked to standardize its products and alter designs to target fleet customers, while introducing new product lines such as a refrigerated trailer and more.

As part of an effort to surmount workforce challenges, “we knew we had to significantly automate,” Wahlin said. One of the company’s facilities in Stoughton

features several iterations of production machinery, including a fully automated system that was installed just over a year ago. Wahlin said that part of the factory will be expanded over time.

Looking ahead, Wahlin said the company wants to leverage growth opportunities in the United States, Canada and Mexico while pursuing other international partnerships.

"I think Stoughton Trailers is going to continue to have a greater global presence," he said. "Our goals are definitely to continue to expand ... we've had some great wind at our backs the last several years. It's not always going to be that way, but we're trying to do things now to make us stronger in those tougher times."

Still, Wahlin emphasized that the company is committed to Stoughton for the long haul. Through wages, taxes and donations, he says Stoughton Trailers has had a \$100 million impact on the community just in the past year. He also touted the work of the Wahlin Foundation, which was established to support the communities surrounding the company's manufacturing operations.

"We're very much interested in seeing Stoughton develop for the long term ... We live here, our kids go to school here, we're very tied to the community," he said. "We hope this can be a very positive catalyst to make Stoughton an even better place to live."

See the company's development plans here:

https://www.wisbusiness.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/Stoughton_Masterplan_Vision-Board.pdf

See a photo of Stoughton Trailers' automated systems:

<https://www.wisbusiness.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/Fab-Center-Drone-August-2021-C-scaled.jpg>

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