

Northern Plastics to relocate to Glacier Rail Park



Bill Cook works on repositioning the locking mechanism on injection molded water meter lids at Northern Plastics on Wednesday, May 19. (Casey Kreider/Daily Inter Lake)

Jason Boudreaux works on repositioning the locking mechanism on injection molded water meter lids at Northern Plastics on Wednesday, May 19. (Casey Kreider/Daily Inter Lake)

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The key to filling all the lots at Glacier Rail Park can be summarized in just one word: plastics.

That's not just enigmatic advice from the 1967 film "The Graduate" — it's also the linchpin for the completion of a major piece in the revitalization of the city of Kalispell.

Glacier Rail Park opened in 2018 in the hopes that the rail-served property would attract industrial businesses into Kalispell but out of the downtown core area. With Northern Plastics' decision to expand from its Montana 35 location into the last available rail park lots, the park is officially full — well ahead of schedule, according to Jerry Meerkatz with Flathead County Economic Development Authority and Montana West Economic Development. Those organizations took the lead in developing the park.

"We're absolutely delighted to have filled out that park in such short order," Meerkatz said.

Building the industrial site has been a gradual process, but reaching full capacity is a major milestone.

Glacier Rail Park is just one component of an ambitious effort to transform downtown Kalispell. The entire undertaking has been underway for more than a decade.

It involves ending rail service on the downtown train tracks, replacing them with a multi-use path, redeveloping the properties along the railroad and relocating rail-served businesses to the new industrial park northeast of town.

The end goal is a vision of Kalispell that balances industry, history, walkability and culture to make the town an attractive place to live and work for the foreseeable future.

Essential to realizing that vision was the need to find a new space for rail customers. Even though Meerkatz has been working on Glacier Rail Park for years, he said he didn't expect all 44 acres to sell as quickly as they have.

NORTHERN PLASTICS
joins CHS and Northwest Drywall as the park's third tenant.

The injection molding company plans to expand into the rail park from its longtime headquarters in the recognizable red building along Montana 35.

Northern Plastics currently manufactures polymer molds in its 10,000-square-foot facility, but increasing demand is pushing the family-owned company to go bigger.

Jason Bukowski with Northern Plastics said the industry has “really boomed” in the past five years.

The Kalispell company produces a variety of plastic parts for uses all over the world—and beyond. Northern Plastics’ products are utilized by municipalities in Colorado and Kentucky, builders in Australia and even in NASA space vessels.

Right now, Northern Plastics churns out approximately 1,000 molds a day. Its machines run 24 hours a day, five days a week, and employees work in three shifts to maintain the constant workflow.

But Bukowski believes the company could be doing a lot more.

At the rail park, Northern Plastics will more than double its footprint, hire more workers and operate a transload facility where infrequent rail users can get access to the tracks.

Bukowski said the new facility likely won’t be built until late next summer.

It’s an interesting time to expand, since the pandemic and the oil industry have put a strain on many plastic manufacturers.

Bukowski said the cost of raw materials has increased 40% over the past six months.

“That’s been tough lately,” he admitted. “It’s hurting a lot of molders.”

But he said Northern Plastics had the foresight to pre-purchase a lot of the necessary materials and get ahead of the industry changes.

He expects the company to continue to grow, and it’s possible Glacier Rail Park might follow suit.

Since Northern Plastics scooped up the last open spot, Meerkatz said he’s been inundated with calls from additional businesses looking to get into the area.

The sudden interest has generated conversations about adding 10 more acres to the park in the coming years.

“The next two to five years are going to be really exciting for this project,” Meerkatz promised.

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