



MADE IN MENTOR OHIO

The city of Mentor is a manufacturing leader in the state of Ohio with a strong concentration of research and development, engineering, and metalworking firms. Nearly 300 manufacturers have chosen Mentor as their home.

Not unlike bigtime football games on Friday nights, shopping centers with something for everybody, or the national historic site of President James A. Garfield, manufacturing is among the first things people associate with Lake County's largest city.

"Manufacturing is the backbone of the Mentor economy," said Kevin D. Malecek, director of economic development and international trade for the city of Mentor.

There's no surefire way to account for everything that is made in Mentor, but the breadth of that list is impressive. The labels found on the beauty products in your cabinet? Manufactured here by Avery Dennison. How about the antireflective coating for the visors Tom Cruise wore in the cockpit in the 2022 film *Top Gun Maverick*? Created in Mentor by North American Coating Laboratories (NACL).

The city is home to 1,700 businesses, and nearly 20 percent of them are manufacturers. That's the sixth-largest amount in the state, according to the city's Department of Economic and Community Development. The city has 11 industrial parks and nearly 8,000 acres of land that is zoned for manufacturing. Mentor manufacturers are making great use of that space, with product shipments exceeding

\$2.5 billion annually.

"Mentor is a growing community of manufacturing companies from low to high technology and could not be more welcoming and helpful with opportunities to grow your business," said Brian Wilson, president and CEO of NACL.

Since Mentor's 1963 incorporation, a variety of successful manufacturers like Libra Industries, Fredon, and De Nora Tech have flourished after opening, renovating, or relocating to Mentor. Still, it takes more than a rich history to attract firms that could take their talents anywhere around the state, country, or world. Kenneth J. Filipiak, Mentor's city manager, knows success does not happen by chance, "Our entire administration and city council work hard to create a climate where businesses of all sizes feel they have a partner in the city that values them and will work to meet their needs. It's not just lip service. The success of our community relies on a strong economy, especially our manufacturing segment."

On the brink of its 50th anniversary, NACL moved from Highland Heights to its Mentor location at 9450 Pineneedle Drive. The firm started out by primarily providing coating for eyeglasses, sunglasses, and mir-

rors, but now that represents just 15 percent of NACL's work, Wilson said. The company has been focused on developing products for autonomous vehicles, machine vision and robotics, augmented and virtual reality technologies, and space exploration. "Our customer base could be one of the most diverse in the world—we work (with everybody from) the mom-and-pop optical shop down the street in Mentor where you get your eyeglasses prescription filled, and I've also put on presentations in the boardrooms of Tesla, SpaceX, Google, and Apple," Wilson said.

Manufacturers like NACL have relocated to Mentor because of its



NACL is an industry leading thin-film optical coating provider working with a diverse array of customers in fields including military, medical, automotive, consumer device, augmented reality, machine learning, and LIDAR/UAV systems. —Photo credit: NACL



Making ground with VFX in film production, Bloc Corp collaborated with Urban Canyons to not only recreate but visually reincarnate the Chinese Warrior Queen, Fu Hao, in all her historical glory. The heroic and empowering drama-documentary series will be broadcast from Germany to the USA, and China to the UK!
—Photo credit: Bloc Corp.

reputation for helping them grow. The size of the economy and services provided to manufacturers provides both a built-in customer base and convenient partnering opportunities. Mentor also offers very creative performance-based incentives and grants, and works hard to connect businesses to regional, state, and federal sources to help identify growth capital. But it's the personal touch that makes the biggest difference.

"We do try to be very business-friendly, in terms of helping manufacturers start up and making linkages and connections for them," Malecek said. "I think it's really all those attributes, starting with that rich history we've had here. But history is not going to mean anything for a manufacturer without what's happening at the present."

Wilson agrees after joining Mentor city representatives on an international trade mission. "They were very strategic in helping me get contacts and meetings that I probably would not have been able to get otherwise," Wilson said. "They got me to the right people in these large organizations that I could speak to about our services. All of this was basically a direct result of the introductions that the city of Mentor made for me."

Mentor is one of the only cities in Ohio that has an international presence. Since 2015 the city has grown its International Trade Initiative, which is highlighted by an annual trip to Europe to promote Mentor as

a potential place for companies to set up U.S. operations and to promote companies in Mentor as potential partners. NACL accompanied the city this past year, and in Scotland, where Wilson met with representatives from local chambers of commerce. The visit was so successful that it inspired Wilson to open an NACL European sales office in The Netherlands. He later secured a spot in Electro Optics' inaugural "Photonics 100" list of the 100 people driving the photonics industry forward. Wilson will also go on a similar trip with the Mentor group to Ireland this summer and NACL will be an exhibitor in a couple of European trade shows.

A recent success from the program is the company Bloc Digital, a digital technology company located in Derby, United Kingdom, in the process of establishing an office in Mentor. Its owner, Keith Cox, was introduced to Mentor through a presentation city representatives gave at a local chamber of commerce meeting. Although interested in a U.S. presence, they had not established a clear timeline. After the chance encounter, a conversation began.

"It wasn't on our agenda, but it was the right time, right person, right meeting," Cox said. "As we talked, Mentor seemed to be the ideal place because we had grown our company in the UK in the Midlands, surrounded by industrial and engineering businesses. A tech company is often located down in London, and in the States,

it might be in Silicon Valley. But our clients are not in Silicon Valley — our competitors are. Our clients are in places like Cleveland and Mentor."

Bloc Digital uses its immersive digital technology studios to create bespoke digital visualization, augmented and virtual reality, web, and mobile marketing solutions for manufacturers and industrial clients. Cox and business partner, Chris Hotham, launched its Derby operations in 2000 and have enjoyed servicing a roster of blue-chip companies like Shell, Rolls-Royce, Lubrizol, and Siemens. Mentor's infrastructure, proximity to clients and universities, and its cost of living ultimately made it the best choice.

"It's really cost effective to set a business up there ... yes, we could be anywhere in the world, but it's affordable, clients are there, and it's in the middle (of the U.S.), so you can go left, right, down, up when you need to travel," Cox said.

Infrastructure is always a big draw for Mentor, Malecek said. The presence of CSX and N&S rail service, access to Interstate 90, and the Cleveland Hopkins International and Akron-Canton Regional airports mean Mentor manufacturers are located within about 500 miles of half of the nation's population. Mentor is also about 18 miles from the Port of Cleveland, which handles more than 13 million tons of containerized and noncontainerized cargo per year with an express route to Europe that connects the Great Lakes to the Port of Antwerp.

Cox envisions Bloc Digital growing incrementally to 26 employees eventually, but for now he is continuing to make local connections and looking to hire a manager.

"They've been nothing short of amazing to put it bluntly," Cox said of the city. "They've hosted us, set us up with all the contacts we'd need, colleges, universities, the chamber, you name it. They're our one-stop Rolodex."

The future of manufacturing in Mentor looks even brighter thanks to the efforts of groups like the Alliance for Working Together Foundation

(AWT), an organization focused on the workforce of tomorrow. In the last year, AWT opened its Transformation Training Center on Tyler Boulevard. With the latest and best equipment, they are working with Mentor High School and other educational partners to train the next generation of employees entering the manufacturing workforce on the hard skills they will need to meet the growing job demands.

Said City Manager Filipiak, “our staff does an excellent job of business recruitment, but we need more young people to understand the tremendous benefits of a career in manufacturing to fill our growing needs. A manufacturing renaissance is underway in Ohio that will succeed if fueled by a talented, ample workforce.”

“I think that investment in the future of our workforce and workforce development is essential and that’s something else that kind of keeps that vibrancy in this sector going and makes us a place where you want to be,” Malecek said.

Local business leaders like Wilson at

The AWT Transformation Center will provide training and pathways for northeast Ohio’s collective skilled manufacturing labor force and serve as a hub for workforce development for the region. The AWT Foundation has partnered with area manufacturing companies, and county, state, and federal legislators to provide training for skilled manufacturing jobs.

—Photo credit: AWT



NACL are excited to see the next wave of manufacturers come to Mentor.

Whoever they are and whatever products they make, Wilson knows they’ll receive ample assistance from the city.

“They provide a lot of resources that if companies take advantage of them, it can be very fruitful for them,” Wilson said. “When I first moved here, I never thought I’d be traveling with the city manager and the economic development director looking for ways to help me grow my business and mutually be a spokesperson for the city of Mentor,

saying, ‘hey, we’re a great place to live, to work, and to set up a manufacturing facility.’ We work together and for mutual benefits.”

—Article by Brandon Baker

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