

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

August 9, 2021

CONTACT

Heather Baker
Managing Partner
Southwest Michigan First
180 E. Water Street, Suite 2690, Kalamazoo, MI 49007
269.553.9588 or hsmithbaker@southwestmichiganfirst.com

Southwest Michigan First Announces 568 Jobs, New Location, CEO Search Status and More in 2021

Kalamazoo, Michigan – Southwest Michigan First today announced the cumulative impact of its economic development and community efforts thus far in 2021 to support job creation throughout the seven-county Southwest Michigan region it serves and to provide support to businesses as they rally in the face of the ongoing COVID pandemic.

Most recently announced on July 26 by Governor Gretchen Whitmer were economic development grants in support of two new manufacturing campuses in Sturgis for RV manufacturers [Heartland Recreational Vehicles, LLC](#) (Heartland RV) and [Cruiser RV, LLC](#). The projects are expected to support 450 new jobs in St. Joseph County. Here are the highlights:

- Indiana-based Heartland RV and Cruiser RV [will add 450 new jobs](#) and invest a total of \$35.9 million in Sturgis with support from the Michigan Strategic Fund (MSF), each resulting in a \$700,000 Michigan Business Development Program performance-based grant.
- The Michigan Department of Transportation (MDOT) further supported Heartland RV with a \$307,277 Transportation Economic Development Fund (TEDF) grant for infrastructure improvements.
- Both projects are the companies' first operations in Michigan, underscoring the strength of Michigan's manufacturing workforce.
- The companies chose Michigan for the projects over competing sites in Indiana, primarily because of the availability of skilled workers in the area.

"Michigan's business climate and highly skilled manufacturing workforce are creating an environment where businesses like Heartland RV and Cruiser RV can thrive and grow, creating good jobs in St. Joseph County," said Governor Whitmer in a [press release](#). "This is great news for workers, their families and our economy as we continue our economic jumpstart and put Michigan back to work. With the help of companies like Cruiser RV and Heartland RV, we can build back our state's economy stronger than ever."

These jobs bring the total jobs announced year-to-date by the regional economic catalyst to 568 with accompanying total investment of \$46,800,000. Earlier announcements occurred at [Eliason Corporation](#), a part of [Senneca Holdings](#), which relocated three divisions from its plant in Pittsburgh to its Southwest Michigan location in Portage, [bringing 20 new jobs](#) and at [Midwest Fastener](#) which made investments at its Portage headquarters located on Shaver Road, as well as expanding operations at its Decatur facility. [The \\$10.8 million investment](#) by the fastener manufacturer and distributor will create 90 new positions over the next three years. Governor Whitmer joined the

Michigan Economic Development Corporation (MEDC) in June to confirm the project's receipt of a \$500,000 Business Development Program performance-based grant from the MSF.

Other support for industry employers occurred when Going PRO Talent Fund grants were announced for the 2021 fiscal year. These grants help workers across the state to secure employment, industry-recognized credentials and strong wages. Here in Southwest Michigan, Southwest Michigan First worked closely with companies and Michigan Works! Southwest on the process. Southwest Michigan First's services included providing education to companies during one-on-one business consultations and training sessions on the application process and benefits of the program, in addition to writing letters of support. Overall, [103 companies](#) located in Southwest Michigan received \$4,852,270 in grant funding, with an average award of \$47,109.

The group has also supported the needs of small businesses by helping the MEDC distribute \$4,150,000 [among 279 small businesses](#), retaining 3,819 jobs, throughout Berrien, Branch, Calhoun, Cass, Kalamazoo, St. Joseph and Van Buren counties. Approved by the MSF on January 14, 2021, the Michigan Small Business Survival Grant Program provided support to Michigan small businesses to meet the urgent need of businesses that had experienced a significant financial hardship due to COVID emergency "gatherings and face mask orders." Southwest Michigan First served as both the receiving house for applications and liaison with other economic development groups representing small businesses.

While Southwest Michigan First traditionally receives visibility for its efforts to locate and strengthen the presence of companies in Southwest Michigan, the group also offers a cadre of small business services. Its team has led local Chamber activities since 2013 when the Kalamazoo Regional Chamber of Commerce reached out with a strategic alliance to put the Chamber under the Southwest Michigan First umbrella. Rebranded as the [Southwest Michigan First Chamber](#), its work has resulted in 4,806 small business consultations and more than 7,800 connections at business networking events. The Southwest Michigan First Chamber currently represents [about 400 local businesses](#) and, since May of this year, is led by [Clarence Lloyd](#), a highly respected leader within the Greater Kalamazoo region for over 25 years with success ranging from the nonprofit sector to Fortune 100 companies.

In addition to these core activities, Southwest Michigan First remains active in a number of public-private partnerships. For example, [a partnership with Kalamazoo RESA](#) formed ahead of the 2019 Career & Technical Education (CTE) millage campaign, remains strong as the two agencies are united in the goal of redesigning Kalamazoo County's CTE system. The leadership of both agencies is confident they will be able to deliver a substantial amount of the cost of the construction of a new, centrally located Career Center that will house equipment and courses that prepare students for future opportunities in this region's labor market. Logistical research is currently underway in search of a suitable site in the hopes of cutting the ribbon on the new facility in the fall of 2024, as well as conducting joint efforts to:

- Develop a strong career awareness and exploration programs to help students make informed plans for their future.
- Design cutting-edge high school CTE curriculum with cooperation and collaboration from regional employers and higher education institutions, with preliminary work happening under the direction of a [CTE steering committee](#).
- Implement targeted supports to address systemic barriers to participation and ensure equitable access for all students.

Southwest Michigan First now heads into the latter half of 2021 with strong momentum buoyed by two recent strategic moves. The first being locational. In July, the 22-person team moved into the Warner Building at 180 E. Water Street in downtown Kalamazoo, where it is collocated with other well-known organizations such as Warner Norcross + Judd LLP, Communities in Schools, Stryker Johnston Foundation and The Kalamazoo Promise.

"As an organization focused on leveraging and promoting community and business partnerships, we will be able to use our new location to create a welcoming space for leaders throughout our region to come together and interact

as we pursue our mission of ‘the greatest force for change is a job.’ We also wanted our team, which has tripled in size over time, and the clients we are meeting with to have access to Kalamazoo’s vibrant downtown area,” said Carla Sones, president and interim CEO of Southwest Michigan First.

Sones has consistently served in this dual role since the Southwest Michigan First Board of Directors began its search for a permanent CEO. Back in a February 2021 [Statement to the Community](#), its Board made a commitment to “assure a [search] process that is open, transparent and inclusive of those who depend upon us to improve economic development and employment opportunities for all we serve.” Since that time, its directors reimagined its search process which recently began again, starting with a survey seeking input regarding which attributes its future CEO should possess. The survey was distributed to 655 participants across 469 community organizations. To date, 37 percent of those solicited have responded with the top attributes being recorded as:

- A strong understanding of the economic development ecosystem and how to work within a multi-jurisdictional region to strengthen commerce.
- History of successful leadership that is visionary, diverse, inclusive, accessible, equitable and authentic.
- Ability to develop and sustain trusting relationships with leadership of companies, national and international site selectors, elected officials and community partners.

Southwest Michigan First’s Board of Directors is working with Jorgenson Consulting, a leading national executive search firm that has served organizations in nonprofit, economic development and community development industries for more than 25 years, to identify its next CEO. Interested applicants can find the job posting on [Indeed](#) or [LinkedIn](#) or by contacting Jorgenson Consulting directly at smf@jci-inc.net.

ABOUT SOUTHWEST MICHIGAN FIRST

Founded in 1999 on the principle that the greatest force for change is a job, Southwest Michigan First is an organization of privately funded economic development advisors who act as the catalyst for economic growth in Southwest Michigan. For more information about Southwest Michigan First, please visit us at www.southwestmichiganfirst.com, or call 269.553.9588.

###