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Auto City gets (green) thumbs up from mayor

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March 4, 2010

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The new Auto Parts City, an \$8 million investment more than two years in the making, is expected to have a soft opening later this month as a state-of-the-art, environmentally-conscious auto recycling facility which owners Jay and Larry Brosten say is a green solution to an inevitable problem.

"Everybody drives a car," said Larry Brosten. "When the full cycle of your vehicle ends, it has to go somewhere."

Accomplishing this while considering environmental issues is where Auto Parts City comes in.

Located at 3535 Washington Street in Gurnee, just south of their existing facility, the updated Auto Parts City will place a renewed emphasis on recycling everything from vehicle fluids to auto parts, using the most modern equipment and techniques.

NEW BEGINNING

The existing site, said the Brosten brothers, who are third-generation auto recyclers, was antiquated and could not be upgraded because it is a non-conforming use per the Village of Gurnee. The existing site had been grandfathered in by a previous board many years ago.

Because of this, the Brostens began searching for a new site. After a couple failed attempts elsewhere, the brothers purchased the 19-acre former Nordic Properties site in 2007 and began a long village approval process that sparked public outcry from a number of Park City residents whose mobile homes abutted the proposed new location.

Public hearings went on for hours as residents argued that a "junkyard" in their backyard would diminish their quality of life and was an inappropriate use to approve for a residential area. Concerns included excessive noise from cars being crushed and stripped of their parts, the potential for hazardous waste spills, and air and water pollution. Residents also raised questions regarding stormwater drainage, safety and decreased property values.

The Brostens' proposal to have the property rezoned from I-2 General Industrial to I-3 Intensive Industrial was shot down by the village in April 2007. They returned with a different approach to develop the new Auto Parts City under a planned unit development or PUD agreement, which allowed for more restrictions. On Oct. 1, 2007, the Brostens were unanimously approved for a special use permit for a PUD with underlying I-2 zoning, which gives the village the most control over the development and land usage.

Nearly 30 conditions accompanied the approval, including measures to control noise with berms and acoustical fencing. Even the compact crusher, which runs on electricity and not a noisy diesel engine, was required to be enclosed in a concrete building.

But the controversy persisted. A couple weeks after the board's unanimous approval, Gurnee Mayor Kristina Kovarik read a statement which outlined her concerns that the board's action reversed the planning efforts of prior boards. In the end, Kovarik said she chose not to veto the approval because of her respect for the democratic process.

NEW PERSPECTIVE

Today, Kovarik said she no longer has any concerns about the new Auto Parts City, following a tour of the facility.

"This is one of those examples of what you see on paper can't capture what it's actually turned out to be,"

Kovarik told Pioneer Press. "Until you see it, you really don't understand. It's absolutely cutting edge. I was very impressed. It's quiet. It's clean. My concerns are completely alleviated."

Since they first approached the village, plans for the new Auto Parts City have been misunderstood, said the Brostens.

"No one understood what we were building here," said Larry Brosten. "It's not a junkyard stacked with cars."

RECYCLE, REUSE

The new Auto Parts City expects to process about 1,000 vehicles each month.

That process begins by determining vehicle ownership. Discarded or abandoned personal items, such as clothing, is donated to charity.

Vehicle fluids are then removed using two high-capacity Crow Environmental fluid evacuation machines. All of the fluids are stored in an explosion-proof containment area.

In keeping with its focus on recycling, recovered gasoline is used to fuel the facility's own fleet while recovered oil fuels furnaces that heat the buildings. Even anti-freeze and wiper fluid is recycled, bottled and sold to car lots.

Once the battery is removed, all reusable parts of the vehicle, including tires, are removed for on-site sale to the public. The balance of the vehicle is compacted by a crusher then delivered to a regional shredder.

Auto Parts City also operates a used vehicle lot. Park City will benefit from the sale of those used cars, and tires, while Gurnee will collect sales tax from the sale of car parts. The split is based on the point of sale, because portions of the site are Gurnee while some are Park City.

The new site will also generate tax revenue for District 56 schools.

Auto Parts City has come a long way over the past couple years, said Jordan Madorsky, public relations. The process included obtaining stormwater management approval, bringing water and sewer to the site and working with the county on easement agreements. Construction was held up by the poor economy and falling commodity prices for scrap steel and other metals, which impacted the Brostens' existing business.

"They entered into this in a very different economy," said Madorsky. "It's remarkable what they've gotten done."

Madorsky said it's a credit to the Brostens' business reputation that they were approved for a commercial mortgage by First Midwest Bank in a time when most banks are reluctant to loan.

The new facility will have a grand opening on Earth Day, April 22. The existing site is expected to close by the end of May. It is now being marketed for sale and redevelopment.

To learn more about Auto Parts City visit www.21stcenturyautorecycling.com.

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