

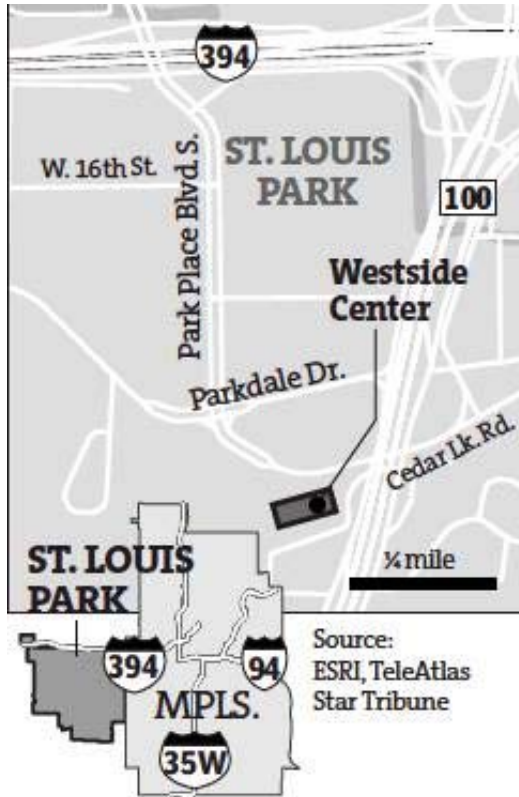
400 new jobs in St. Louis Park

A former Ovaltine plant has been transformed into a new business center that's nearly full.

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Photos by RICHARD TSONG-TAATARII • rtsong-taatarii@startribune.com Once a Nestlé Ovaltine plant, the West side Center has been transformed into a bustling multi-user industrial hub.



The sweet smell of success in St. Louis Park used to come from the Ovaltine plant.

Last week that sweet smell returned, figuratively, with the old factory's reopening as Westside Center, a multiuse industrial and commercial hub.

Minneapolis-based Hillcrest Development bought the 280,000-square-foot complex two years ago after its most recent owner, Nestlé, closed the factory and eliminated about 250 jobs. After an extensive renovation, the complex is now 96 percent leased, housing 12 different companies and more than 400 employees.

Tenants include the Fish Guys food wholesaler, building products supplier Lyman Cos., and Irish Titan, an e-commerce and digital strategy firm.

When Hillcrest took over, "It looked like a bomb had gone off here," said Scott Tankenoff, the company's president.

He declined to reveal how much was spent on the renovation: "More than expected," he said with a laugh.

Mayor Jake Spano said renovation and repurposing is a crucial growth strategy in mature suburbs like St. Louis Park.

"We're a fully built-out community. We do not have the luxury of greenfields. We see this as a tremendous asset," he said.

In addition, Spano said, the city sought "a more local economic model" for the development, one that wouldn't leave its future at the mercy of a single multinational corporation. That's been fulfilled with a roster of local firms across a variety of businesses.

Tankenoff said the center meets today's demand for flexible, unique space.

“The companies that are here were not looking for commodity space,” he said. “You can’t do cookie-cutter.”

The site, located along the Cedar Lake Regional Trail and near the growing West End shopping and entertainment district, fits neatly into an interconnected lifestyle, he said.

Regional and local officials at the opening ceremony promised to work on making the site more easily accessible for public transit users and others who don’t travel by car. The complex includes a bike center with bike lockers and shower facilities.

“It would be good to connect to the West End,” said Metropolitan Council Member Gail Dorfman, a former St. Louis Park mayor. “If we can build a bridge to the [Vikings] stadium that’s only used eight times a year, we should be able to do something here.”

The Met Council provided grant money for asbestos, lead and soil cleanup. “To take this vacant, blighted site and transform it is really something special,” Dorfman said.

“When Nestlé closed, there were real questions about what would happen here,” Spano said. “Now we’ve got 12 new small businesses here. Increasingly, communities are looking to re-purpose. Re-purposing something that already exists is always going to be more efficient.”

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