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Flexibility drives reoccupation

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WEST MICHIGAN-As more facilities turn up empty as a result of bankruptcies, plant closures and other reasons, economic developers are pressured to continuously look for ways to make the empty buildings attractive to new businesses.

"Flexibility is the key to being able to reuse a facility regardless of the use," Rebecca A. Morgan, a nationally recognized facilities expert and CEO of Cleveland-based *Fulcrum ConsultingWorks Inc.*, told *MiBiz*.

Economic developers typically try to target a specific industry for the facility, and usually the industry targeted is congruent to the industry that just moved out of the building. Morgan says that is a mistake- "In many cases the company moves out because the facility is no longer able to meet the needs specific to its industry. So no matter how much a developer tries to convince a comparable company to move in, it just doesn't happen," she said.

Morgan contends the best resource for economic developers is the former facility manager. "This person may be able to provide some valuable information in terms of what did and didn't work for its specific uses. This is not saying that the facilities are outdated for use by other industries, but it will let you know if others in its specific industry will tend to avoid the building."

The facilities expert pointed to some generic guidelines that make any facility more appealing for reuse. The ease of wiring is of utmost importance and when not addressed can actually be a limiting aspect on reuse. Various forms of technology including computers, telecommunications, robotics and machinery all require the ability to wire without much difficulty. "Companies want to be able to quickly drop lines from the ceiling," she said.

Sufficient and flexible utilities also are crucial, especially as firms embrace philosophies like lean manufacturing. These popular philosophies commonly require that equipment be moved, and most likely on a regular basis. "Power, air and water must all be convenient. You do not want the utilities to define where a business is going to put its equipment and how it is going to run its operation," said Morgan.



Flexible truck pick-up and delivery routes should also be primary concerns. Are the docks and overhead doors conveniently located in a means by which a company can flexibly operate its business? Where can trucks be and where can trucks go? "If truck traffic is a community concern, the developer may want to look at attracting industries like software development firms that are not as reliant on heavy traffic flow," Morgan said.

Environmental and atmospheric concerns must also be addressed. "No one in their right mind would buy a building without having thorough EPA studies with positive results," said Morgan. If EPA studies exist showing that problems are not present, it will be much easier to find a suitable tenant. If there are issues, it would behoove the developer to look at government funded options to clean the site in advance of looking for a buyer.

Trying to market a facility to an industry that it is not appropriately suited will only result in failure, said Morgan. "Anyone can turn a plant into an ideal plant, but why would they when other options are available? Try to look at the limitations of what could feasibly operate within the building. Everything boils down to the flexibility the potential user has within the space. The more built-in constraints, the less attractive the location."