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SolarWorld Chooses Hillsboro & Oregon's Quality of Life

by Craig Beebe

Oregon and local leaders celebrated in 2007 when Solarworld, one of the world's leaders in solar electric technology manufacturing, chose Hillsboro for a major new manufacturing facility that would become the country's largest solar plant. The celebration continued last year when the company added a module assembly factory and fulfilled a promise to add 1,000 new jobs in Washington County.

In picking a location for its facility, Solarworld didn't choose to pave over prime Washington County farmland for parking lots and new buildings. Instead, it selected a site within the existing urban growth boundary. The German-based company, which began expanding into the U.S. in 2006 after acquiring Shell Solar, has shown that it is a leader not just in the high-quality technology and equipment it has developed to create clean energy, but in its philosophy and attitude toward the community and environment right here in Oregon. In the process, it demonstrates the possibilities for economic expansion and job creation without damaging regional beauty and quality of life.

"The site and region had just the right attributes," says Ben Santarris, a Solarworld spokesman. These attributes include a "silicon-savvy workforce" (with Intel and other high-tech firms located nearby), support from higher education institutions, and the fact that the 97-acre site had previously housed another silicon-based manufacturer, though it had been abandoned for 10 years. Moreover, Santarris says, the company was impressed by how the state, county, and city "embraced our mission," with an "environmental ethos and responsiveness" that helped reduce barriers and get Solarworld up and operating quickly. Leaders were enthusiastic about a large new employer that matched citizens' values of environmentally responsible development, and offered incentives and facilitated a cooperative process that appealed to Solarworld as well.

The company has created a wide range of jobs in Hillsboro, from those that require little or no experience to highly demanding engineering positions. It has had to attract engineers from other places in the country, and Santarris says that "Oregon's natural beauty and lifestyle play a major role" in bringing high-quality talent to work in Hillsboro. Indeed, the company website (<http://solarworld-usa.com/about-solarworld/locations/hillsboro-oregon/living-in-portland.aspx>) (<http://solarworld-usa.com/about-solarworld/locations/hillsboro-oregon/living-in-portland.aspx>) recruits potential candidates by describing the Portland region's "distinct quality of life advantage," including its recreational opportunities and scenic beauty. "We want to highlight what a great state it is," Santarris said. "It's a great place to live."

Solarworld is committed to making Oregon an even better place to live, with a neighborly philosophy that includes hiring local businesses for products and services, from printing to landscaping, sponsoring community events, and protecting the environment.

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