

Mary Kohrell oversees economic development for Calumet County, which is ranked second only to St. Croix County in number of residents leaving their home county for work. When the county's Brillion Iron Works closed in 2016, it dealt a major blow to its namesake community.

Now, Ariens Co. has partnered with the City of Brillion to breathe new life into the massive site. Plans include renovating an old building to create an Ariens research and development facility, adding new housing in the community and improving access to trails and recreation. The efforts are aimed, in part, at drawing more residents to Brillion to work for Ariens and other employers.

Kohrell, the county's community economic development director, talked with Insight about plans for the project. In addition to the Brillion Iron Works transformation and positive developments in Hilbert, Brillion is set to host the season's first Fox Cities Chamber of Commerce Bazaar After Dark night market on May 11 in conjunction with a Brillion Habitat for Humanity Rock the Block project.



Site resurrection

A major project is underway at the former Brillion Iron Works site. What's the latest?

Mary Kohrell: The former Brillion Iron Works property is 144 acres. There are plans that will take a decade or maybe two decades to completely revitalize that entire property. There are a number of plans that are transforming in the short term in the area along Highway 10, which is more of the northwest portion of the site.

Brillion Iron Works has already been transformed into the Brillion Works property (what the site is now called). They've got branding, a logo and a website. Ariens created Plant 4 in what was referred to as the farm implement building, and that is the customer care center. That has been revitalized, and they are starting to work on a new welcome center component.

They have received the Wisconsin Economic Development Corp. Idle Sites grant. There are plans that they will be starting in April. They're working on clearing the buildings for auction purposes. They will be taking out residual items of value and auctioning off those materials, and then they're looking at doing demolition this summer.

What amenities do leaders hope to add?

They've been working with Wisconsin DOT to have road access off Highway 10. They're looking at building a road that will really pull that property together ... and help it flow better than what it does now. On the northwest portion, they're looking at a mix of retail and commercial outlets along Highway 10.

They're considering a day care, and they're considering light manufacturing that would be more in the core of the property. Then they're looking at bringing in a fair amount of housing on the very western edge and really building a bridge between the current housing east of Main Street and just making the traffic flow, making the street flow really connect. There's a lovely, very underutilized park, Horn Park. They're working with the city and the city's parks and recreation committee to improve that park (as well as adding access to the region's trail system).

Opportunities exist as a part of this project to work in conjunction with the city and the state to improve water flow both upstream and downstream. There's a stream that goes under one of the iron works buildings. It flows through big concrete drainage areas, so the river has been moved.

What they are hoping to do as part of this project is really help improve some of the flooding problems.

As they really work on improving water flow and giving people access to the natural waterway, then they're also looking at providing more residential and multiunit housing in the city. (Ariens President and CEO) Dan Ariens also hopes to alleviate some of the housing shortages in the city, and this is really his way of attracting new people into the community and retaining some of the current residents.

What kind of housing are they looking at adding?

They have retained Graef as their professional development consultant. (They are) creating design concepts and doing the market analysis to see what kind of developments could be supported on the site. One of the things that is particularly exciting is trying to preserve some of the history from the site. One of those buildings that they're really looking at preserving is the old iron works foundry — the original foundry, which is the foundry that Great-Grandpa Henry Ariens built before it became Brillion Iron Works. They're looking at preserving that building and (its) history and maybe doing some sort of an open-air community facility. Maybe farmers markets could be held there, community events could be held there.

What's going on elsewhere in the county? Sargent really has been hiring tremendous numbers of people. They do an onboarding training program, and last month, we trained about 100 people. I've been part of that team for about a year and a half, and it represents the three counties that host Sargent operations — Manitowoc, Sheboygan and Calumet. We do it once a quarter, roughly, and for every prior training, we would train maybe groups of 10, up to 35 people. The vast majority of people in the past always lived and worked in another county. This last training we did ... the majority of those people work in Hilbert and live in Calumet County. That is what Sargent has been saying is going to happen: "This is the place we're growing. This is the place where we're recruiting people."

I'm working, also, with the Village of Hilbert to get housing. Hilbert is much smaller, so the odds are more difficult, but Hilbert is also investing time and energy to try to entice residents to want to live there, too. It's easier, relatively speaking in Brillion, because there's more residents, but I think Hilbert is awake, and they are moving to make some improvements there as well. 