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Next generation of manufacturing is here at Cecil

Kevin Hyde

As Cecil Commerce Center transitions from a former military base to a hub for advanced manufacturing, Jacksonville and Northeast Florida are now beginning to realize the benefits.

Today well over 2,000 people are employed at Cecil Commerce Center. Over the next decade, the city's reuse plan projects the center will employ 25,000 people. Additionally, Jacksonville's long-term development agreement with Hillwood, a [Ross Perot](#) company with extensive industrial development expertise, indicates the prospects for continued growth are bright.

Jacksonville knows manufacturing well, and is poised to become a hub for next-generation manufacturing, the phrase used to describe high-tech manufacturing employing the latest design and production techniques. But the city's efforts are not widely known.

On a recent tour of the Cecil Commerce Center, I and a dozen other **Foley & Lardner** attorneys who represent manufacturers across the country saw firsthand how manufacturing plants and facilities have come a long way from the traditional notion of factory workers standing beside a production line while parts moved slowly by.

Instead, planes are being completely remade, from new seats and paint to the overhauling of jet engines. Planes emerge from the large facility with a whole new look and life. All of this activity is driven by highly skilled employees of **Flightstar Aircraft Services** LLC, an aircraft repair, manufacturing and paint facility located at Cecil Commerce Center.

Saft America is another example of next-generation manufacturing right here on the First Coast. Saft operates a highly automated lithium battery manufacturing plant, where unmanned transporters carry uncharged battery cells from the production line to another area of the plant where other unmanned robotics place the cells in inventory.

Workers closely monitor the extremely high-tech process and make critical adjustments to ensure high product quality. The Saft plant employs about 280 people.

The Jacksonville Aviation Authority is actively recruiting companies that can benefit from Cecil's extensive airport facilities.

Although many of the state's manufacturers are small-scale like those at Cecil, the overall impact of the industry to the Florida economy is huge. Last year manufacturing accounted for 5.3 percent of overall GDP and more than 300,000 direct jobs. The state supports manufacturing in tangible ways

such as the passage earlier this year of a new law removing sales tax on manufacturing equipment.

Manufacturing will continue to grow in Jacksonville and Northeast Florida due to the abundance of natural resources, easy accessibility to interstate, rail and air transportation, and a favorable business climate. All of us at Foley & Lardner who toured these two outstanding examples of next-generation manufacturing were impressed with what is being done here at home and the possibilities that exist for future growth.

Truly, industry in Florida is more than tourism and agriculture. We can stand alongside the best in the country when it comes to next-generation manufacturing.

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