



Premier Whitewater Attracts Brownfield Redevelopment

Eric Jackson, owner of the Tennessee brand of paddle sports products, Jackson Kayak, is happy to explain why he chose to locate his business in White County: “Why do I live in Rock Island? This is a very easy question for me to answer. The whitewater is amazing! The fishing is amazing! The beauty of the landscape is breathtaking. It is one of the most beautiful places in the world!” Production of kayaks began in Sparta in 2003, but as the popularity of the product grew exponentially over its first 10 years in business, Jackson began looking for a larger location to expand operations.

Enter the Upper Cumberland Development District (UCDD). Its economic development team pitched the benefits of moving to a 43-acre site in Sparta. At 300,000 square feet, the facility at the site was spacious and well maintained. In fact, many locals would argue that this location was the epicenter of economic activity in White County for the latter half of the 20th century. The plant here had been producing industrial lighting fixtures since 1963, most recently as Philips Luminaries. However, there was one major hurdle. Over the years the land had become contaminated with high concentrations of some nasty compounds: polynuclear aromatic hydrocarbons, volatile organic compounds, polychlorinated biphenyls, and heavy metals. It was the textbook definition of a brownfield.

However, the UCDD had some experience with brownfield redevelopment. In 2009 and again in 2014, they received EPA Brownfields Community-Wide Assessments grants. These grants allowed them to conduct Phase I and II Environmental Site Assessments at the plant in Sparta to catalog environmental conditions. When the contamination was found, Jackson Kayak was then able to enter into a Brownfield Voluntary Agreement with TDEC’s Division of Remediation. The agreement called for the company to sample suspected contamination areas, take steps to clean up the worst polluted areas, and install a vapor barrier under the building to protect indoor air quality. After this was complete, they could renovate and occupy the plant without assuming any of Philips’ liability for the contamination.

With the location secured, Jackson Kayak announced that it would launch a new line of high-end cooler products, Orion coolers, and expand production of its famous whitewater and fishing kayaks. They plan to spend \$6.5 million on the transition. Yet, most importantly for the Sparta community of just 5,000, they promise to hire 250 new people. When the Philips Luminaries plant closed its doors in 2012, 284 people lost their jobs. One could argue that the breathtaking natural beauty of White County, incredible whitewater of Rock Island State Park, and liability protection from the Division of Remediation brought them back. Without TDEC and its programs, these jobs might just have been lost forever.
