

Former GM plant set to transform into massive film production site

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Doraville's Assembly project envisioned as a 'studio city'

An Atlanta media company is looking to transform Doraville's Assembly project — a shuttered General Motors manufacturing plant — into one of the largest film production sites in the state.

Gray Television is in the final stages of purchasing the remaining undeveloped property, roughly 128 acres, to construct at least 10 film studios along with a focus on e-gaming, digital media and robotics, all of which will be dubbed "Studio City." It's the first phase of the company's plan for the site, which also includes apartments, townhomes, a hotel, corporate offices, restaurants and retail space.

Doraville Mayor Joseph Geierman said Gray's plans would be the largest investment in the north DeKalb County city since the GM plant first came to town in the late 1940s. It closed down at the beginning of the Great Recession.

"This is the user that we've been hoping for since the plant closed back in 2008," he said.

It's unclear how much investment Gray plans to make in the development, but the media company will inherit up to \$1.5 billion in bonds the city's economic development authority earlier agreed to issue to help finance the work. City leaders touted Gray's \$2 billion market cap, the company's outstanding stock shares, as a sign of the company's financial health.

Doraville Council Andy Yeoman, who sits on the city's downtown development authority, said the ambitious plans could lead to a new identity for the city.

"Over the next decade, we're going from casting aluminum and casting steel to casting talent and content worldwide," he said.

Big-screen ambitions

Gray owns TV stations in about 100 U.S. markets, which reach roughly a quarter of American households. While it doesn't own any Atlanta-area stations, it's present in Albany, Augusta, Columbus and Savannah.

The company recently began its foray into the film industry by investing in Swirl Films, an independent studio. Jay Gipson, owner

of the developer The Gipson Co., said during a Monday development authority meeting that Swirl Films' success spurred Gray Television to further dive into film production.

"This will be the largest footprint of production studios in the state of Georgia," he said. "They'll be over half a million square feet." Gipson estimated once the first phase of studio construction is complete, more than a thousand jobs will be associated with the development.

Gray is entering a very fertile field. Thanks to generous tax credits passed by the state in 2008, Hollywood productions have flooded into Georgia and companies have been building studios to fulfill that need.

Georgia has about 100 professional soundstages in total, mostly in metro Atlanta. That's on par with Toronto, Vancouver and London. The only two major cities in the United States with greater capacity are Los Angeles and New York.

Gray plans to keep three of the new studios for its own use and one for independent filmmakers, while the rest will be open to companies looking to film in Georgia. A small film studio, Third Rail Studios, is already located on the Assembly site.

"(Gray) will be able to call up the NBC Universals and Amazons and Netflixes of the world and sell them on this site," Yeoman said.

The growth in streaming services including Netflix, Disney+, HBO Max and Peacock, has driven demand for films and television series of all stripes.

"Every decent studio is filled," said Ryan Millsap, CEO of Blackhall Studios, where films such as "Jungle Cruise" and "Jumanji: The Next Level" have shot. "It's amazing. We have more production now in Georgia than in its entire history."

'A challenging site'

It hasn't been a quick process to transform the GM plant into what it is today, let alone a sprawling film and entertainment hub.

"It's a challenging site," Geierman said. "The infrastructure that was put in there was for a manufacturing plant, not for any kind of corporate or even residential use."

Integral Group, an Atlanta real estate company, purchased the vacant 165-acre campus in 2014 for \$50 million. Since then, the factory was demolished, water and sewer pipes were installed across the property and a handful of businesses, including Third Rail Studios, moved to the site.

Integral announced lofty plans for a "city within a city," featuring hundreds of apartments and swaths of office and retail space. However, some cracks began to show last year.

Plans for a new Alamo Drafthouse Cinema fell through last year amid the pandemic — the company declared bankruptcy earlier this month — and city leaders said the residential aspects were the only parts making progress

An 840-unit apartment project is in the works, but Integral and the Doraville City Council weren't on the same page when it came to how many of those units should be offered at below-market rental rates.



“Last summer was the time it really became clear that (Integral) were kind of at the end of the runaway in terms of what they could do in terms of capital and financing the site,” Yeoman said, adding that Integral approached the city last year for an additional loan worth about \$5 million, which was denied.

Egbert Perry, Chairman and CEO at Integral, declined to comment about specific plans but did provide an emailed statement on the pending sale that said, in part, the new owner would “meet our shared development vision for the site.”

Any debt tied to the site will be handled in the sale. Because the sale is between two private entities, specifics will not be public. The 13 parcels in the deal are estimated to be worth more than \$55 million by the county.

Gray has not asked for any other financial incentives from Doraville or the county as part of the pending deal, Geierman and Yeoman

said. Once the sale is finalized, Gipson said construction could begin as early as this summer and take five years to finish.

“We’re going to kick it off really quick,” he said. “We’re not going to let the grass grow under our feet”

Doraville’s Assembly site through the years:

2005: General Motors announced it would close the automobile factory.

2008: The factory, dubbed Doraville Assembly, closed.

2014: Integral Group bought the 165-acre property for \$50 million.

2015: The shuttered factory was demolished.

2015: Doraville established a tax allocation district (TAD) to help support infrastructure development at Assembly. The DeKalb County School Board declined to participate.

2016: Third Rail Studios and Asbury Automotive opened their facilities on the site.

2016: The Doraville Downtown Development Authority approved several financial tools for the redevelopment project, including up to \$1.5 billion in revenue bonds, a 35% property tax incentive for the next 30 years and the Assembly Community Improvement District (CID).

2017: DeKalb County agreed to cooperate with Doraville to encourage infrastructure improvements at Assembly.

2019: Serta Simmons, the nation’s largest mattress company, opened its new headquarters at the site.

2020: Plans for Alamo Drafthouse Cinema fell through.

2021: The Doraville DDA approved to the sale of the Assembly’s remaining 128 acres. ■