

# How Georgia's First Eco-Industrial Park Became a Magnet for Japanese Investment

FEBRUARY 11, 2021 | TREVOR WILLIAMS



A map shows Japanese facilities taking shape and preparing for future growth at The Lakes at Green Valley in Griffin. Map: Griffin-Spalding Industrial Development Authority

The **Georgia** city of **Griffin**, about 50 miles south of Atlanta, didn't set out to attract **Japanese** firms, but it is certainly targeting them now.

Some 15 years ago, the city looked to set a new trend in development by creating a “green” industrial park.

It succeeded, and through “sort of an ‘on-purpose’ accident” became a magnet for Japanese companies.

“We didn’t really know what ‘green’ meant in terms of industrial parks, but we didn’t mean just the trees,” said **David Luckie** executive director of the **Griffin-Spalding County Industrial Development Authority**, said in a **Japan-America Society of Georgia** and **Next Generation Manufacturing** webinar on sustainability Thursday.



*David Luckie*

Enlisting Georgia Tech to research the concept, the authority found that they were blazing a trail in the United States.

Though the concept of “eco parks” existed elsewhere around the world, it was so new to the U.S. that no environmental standards had been developed beyond traditional building certifications, such as LEED and Georgia Peach Green. The authority created its own standard, along with a points system that would provide additional incentives to park tenants to help them defray the costs of complying with regulations.

“We struggled with the vision until we partnered with Georgia Tech and asked them to help us understand what we were talking about,” Mr. Luckie said.

**The Lakes at Green Valley**, technically zoned for mixed-use applications but so far mostly industrial, was eventually born, despite the fact that local SPLOST funding fell \$4 million short of projections. In this way, the recession of 2009 proved a lifeline: With drastically reduced grading costs caused by the building slump, work could be completed with what was in the bank, Mr. Luckie said.

Trees were left standing where possible, and grading was done in a way to leave the topography largely intact, with sites centered around a lake that had previously served as a major bass fishing destination.

Then the Japanese hit parade began. **Otsuka Chemical Co.** was the first to launch production there in 2014, followed by four other Japanese firms — water heater manufacturer **Rinnai**, rice vinegar producer **Marukan**, **Mitsui Kinzoku Die-**

**Casting and Toppan Printing** — that have combined to invest more than \$200 million.

Mr. Luckie said the success has come from a blend of Griffin's welcoming nature and word-of-mouth promotion among manufacturers that place a heavy emphasis on sustainability. Japanese prospects are interested in the final two sites in the park, though the pandemic has delayed site visits.

“It seems to me that Otsuka and Toppan and Marukan and Rinnai and the rest, they all seem to know each other very well and communicate very well with each other, and sometimes they know more about our prospects than we do, which is a great networking prospect for them and for us,” Mr. Luckie said.

Entering its sixth year, Otsuka is projecting a strong 2021 after a downturn last year.

“Our customers have really increased their sales volumes almost to the point where we were sweating a little to keep up with demand, but that's a challenge that we will meet to be able to apply our customers with the product they need,” said **Shannon Michael**, plant manager at Otsuka's Griffin facility, who praised the beauty of the factory's location.

According to **Richard Cope**, a vice president of Toppan Printing, a Japanese giant with a long history in Georgia, one of the toughest decisions was which direction to face the plant.

For the first time ever, the Griffin-Spalding County authorities allowed Lakes at Green Valley occupants to face their buildings away from the road.

“The only requirement is we ask companies to make the rare of the building to look as good as it can look, and Toppan has done a really great job. Sometimes you have to think: ‘Is this really the back of their building?’” Mr. Luckie said.

Beyond the scenery, the location close to customers around the Southeast puts Toppan closer to reaching its 2050 environmental vision. The company supplies coatings that improve the water and oxygen barrier properties of aluminum and polyurethane films, the latter of which is slowly becoming the food and packaging industry standard for recyclability, Mr. Cope said.

Toppan is also investing in the resiliency of its factory, specially when it comes to protecting the workforce against the pandemic. Only one employee has contracted the virus, and the company has created an elastic production plan where different area Mr. Cope wears a wristband that tracks his location in the plant in the case of an exposure to the virus, and temperatures are checked at the office. The air in the factory is recycled every 10 minutes.

“Being flexible is definitely a thing you need to be good at in this environment,” Mr. Cope said, noting that the company will likely see sales growth in 2021.

Mr. Luckie said that same lesson applies to communities looking to woo Japanese investors.

“You really need to establish a culture that is familiar and friendly and open to all the Japanese who happen to transfer here,” Mr. Luckie said, noting that many communities have launched cultural festivals, launched English courses and helped new community members obtain a driver’s license.

“I try to put myself in that position — if I were transferred to Japan ... how would I react? I think you really have to walk the old extra mile in somebody else’s shoes.”