

'OPEN' INVITATION FOR BUSINESS

New or used, the RV industry is thriving after the Great Recession – great news for the Elkhart County area, which produces up to 85 percent of the finished units in a \$13 billion industry. The strength of those numbers has manufacturers and suppliers alike excited for September's week-long RV Open House.

"Open House is great for our county. It brings in tons of people and lots of money for our local economy – manufacturers, stores, hotels and restaurants," says Tim Stephens, CEO of Atwood Mobile Products, a leading supplier of appliances and hardware for the industry. "It gives everyone here a chance to put more products on display, and also gives us time to make requested or necessary tweaks in those products before Louisville," the national trade show in December.

The event, founded in 2009 by community leader Pete Liegl, brings in thousands of dealers from across North America to see product lines and, more importantly, place orders. Multiple sources said they believe billions of dollars in orders – perhaps up to 20 percent of the yearly business for OEMs – are written during the week.

"Those orders really help smooth out some of the peaks and valleys we were seeing prior the start of the Open House. Orders can now take us up pretty close to the Louisville dates, and business there can carry us through January and February."

That's a sentiment shared by Bob Martin, CEO of Thor Industries, who talked last year with WNDU-TV about the value of Open House week to Elkhart's leading industry.

"We look at the fall Open House as a great event for us to further our sales going into the fall of this year, but definitely all the way to the spring of next year,"

Martin said in September 2013. "... We've watched the industry bounce back. It's very resilient."

VALUE FOR CHAMBER MEMBERS

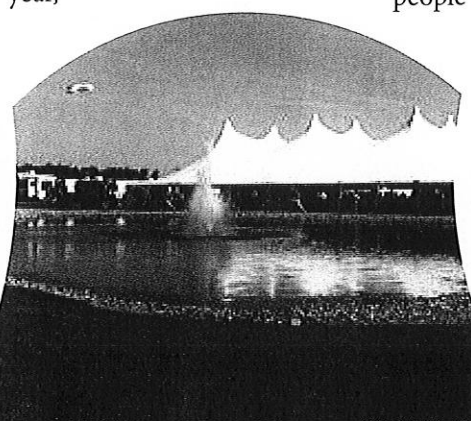
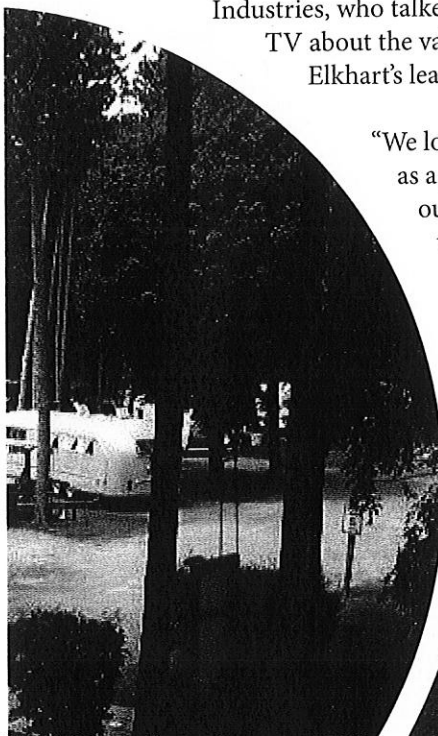
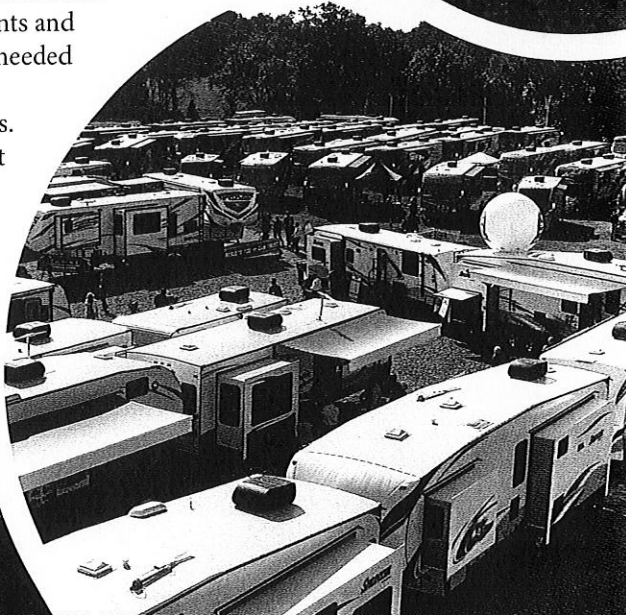
Manufacturers almost have returned to pre-recession production levels, and the latest research by the Recreational Vehicle Industry Association shows consumer interest remains high due to the "enduring appeal" of the lifestyle. RVIA points to the makers' willingness to "right size" RVs, with desired features and pricing, for keeping customers interested.

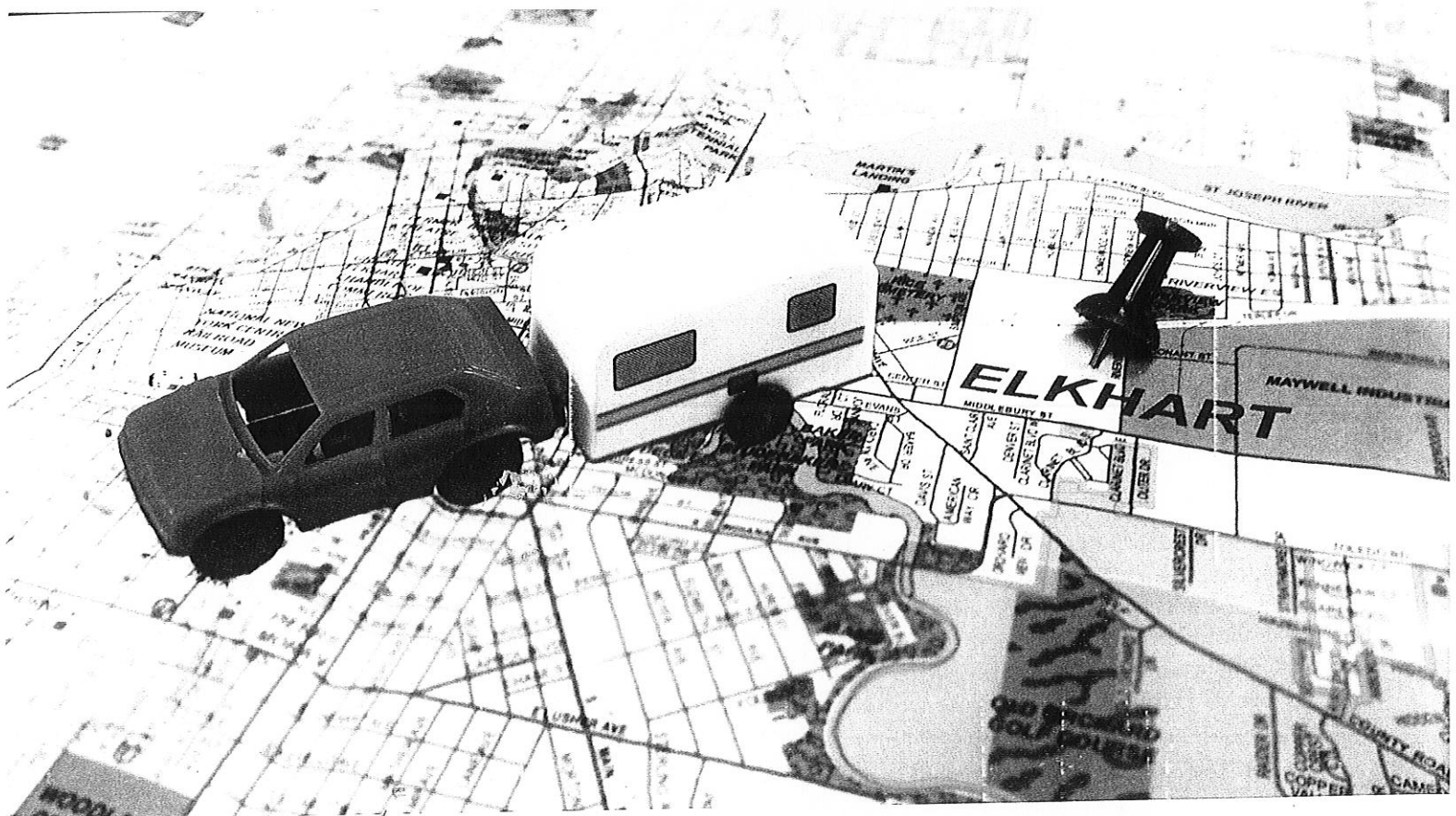
Stephens said he speculates production of 400,000 units a year may be necessary to meet demands because of the years of decreased production from 2008-12. The huge issue, then, becomes the workforce.

The Greater Elkhart Chamber's Economic Development Council, of which Stephens is a participant, has been discussing the problems employers have getting properly skilled and interested workers. WorkOne, representatives from colleges and universities, employers and government officials are involved with the council to find solutions.

Stephens said Atwood has benefitted from another aspect of Chamber membership – enrollment with NationJob, an online employment resource matching companies with workers.

"We signed up for NationJob and landed three folks with the talents and skill sets we needed desperately," Stephens says. "We find that people





want to move back to this area, but they have a hard time finding the right employment opportunity. This really helps.”

With its varied product line, Atwood needs both blue- and white-collar workers – from people on the line to designers in the engineering division. That story is true for many employers, and the Chamber is helping bring solutions.

READY FOR THE ROAD

Walking past a very large display Atwood Mobile Products previously used at Louisville, Stephens doesn't hide the excitement he feels for the RV industry and all the great products made here in Elkhart. He talks about the great “Go RVing” campaign that's the hallmark of RVIA, and he delights

in the real numbers of people who take part in the lifestyle.

Those current customers, after all, will pass along their memories and enthusiasm for traveling and camping to their kids and grandkids.

“We can talk about the workforce and whether we can produce 400,000 units here a year,” he says, “but let's keep it in perspective. These are good problems to have. This year will be a good year – next year will be even better.”

And next year, Barry Pontius will be able to start telling stories about the trips he took when he changed his travel lifestyle.

“We can take our house with us – make our own meals and sleep in our own bed,” Pontius says. “Restaurants and hotels are OK and all right, but taking off in an RV is the thing to do.”

INDIANA TECH

College of Professional Studies

CONTACT US TODAY AT OUR ELKHART CAMPUS:
 MEGHAN SWIHART • ADMISSIONS REPRESENTATIVE
 3333 MIDDLEBURY STREET, ELKHART
 574-296-7075 EXT. 4445
 MMSWIHART@INDIANATECH.EDU

SPECTRUM EYEWEAR GALLERY

David R. Britzke, O.D.

50% Off Eye Exam*

10% Off Glasses, Sunglasses, & Contacts*

*The above discounts cannot be combined with any other offer, promotion or sale.
 Cannot be combined with insurance benefits.

56028 Parkway Ave • Elkhart, IN 46516
 Ph. 574.970.7444 • www.drbritzke.com