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## Possibilities: Developer sees potential at IP's closed mill in Pineville

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Like anyone who has a stake in the economic well-being of Central Louisiana, Rick Ranson was saddened when International Paper announced last year it was closing its Pineville mill, costing more than 200 workers their jobs.

But the economic developer in him sees an opportunity to make the best of a bad situation.

"It's like when England (Air Force Base) closed," Ranson said. "We all stood back and said, 'Now what?' Then we went to work."

Ranson, in his capacity with the Central Louisiana Chamber of Commerce and Central Louisiana Economic Development Alliance, is part of a group trying to turn one of the biggest economic negatives in the area in years into a positive.

The group -- with representatives from the city of Pineville, Cleco Corp., the Chamber and Central Louisiana Economic Development Alliance -- initially formed to help IP employees find new opportunities. It has since changed its focus to the re-use of the IP property.

The group plans to continue meeting quarterly with officials from IP to facilitate that.

"Our immediate concern was the impact on workers and loggers," Ranson said. "That team met its mission. Now we're into how we can use that property to bring jobs to our area. It's not going to be next week or next month, but we hope that soon we can take that valuable piece of property and create some jobs."

The 42-year-old plant will need renovations, but it does have what nearly all potential industrial sites in Central Louisiana lack -- developed transportation and utility infrastructure.

Ranson, who pitches prospects on locating to the area in his capacity with CLEDA, has seen companies locate elsewhere because Central Louisiana doesn't have a lot to sell in terms of sites.

"As an economic developer, I'm excited about the possibilities," Ranson said. "This property has rail, water, wastewater treatment, electricity. It has a (Department of Environmental Quality) certified landfill. Normally there are a lot of hurdles to get certified and licensed for that.

"Usually, the hardest thing about developing a site is the infrastructure. Here's a site that has that."

## McKesson moving

Health-care giant McKesson Corp., which operated a plant in Alexandria under a subsidiary until 2006, is moving its distribution operations to Olive Branch, Miss.

The \$115 million project will replace the company's facility in Memphis, Tenn., and could create more

than 300 jobs, according to a news release.

McKesson Automated Prescription Systems, which specialized in pharmaceutical automation, was bought in 2006 by Parata Systems. Parata closed the company's Alexandria facility, which employed 167 people at the time, soon after.

## Small-business survey

Some nuggets from Capital One's quarterly small-business survey:

--76 percent of the small-business owners surveyed in Louisiana believe that economic conditions are either improving or holding steady.

--35 percent report that their company's financial situation is better than it was last year.

--71 percent said they are able to access the credit or financing they need.

The bad news? Most business owners surveyed remain cautious about reinvestment. Nationally, 62 percent of those surveyed said they do not have plans to hire anyone new in the next six months.

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