

# Town hits economic jackpot to become 'Kia-ville'

## Story Highlights

Mayor: West Point, Georgia, could get 20,000 jobs resulting from Kia car plant

Before Kia announcement, business owner thought town was "gonna die"

News spurs construction of West Point's first new subdivision in 25 years

Auto workers from Detroit, elsewhere applying for jobs at plant, mayor says

By Elise Zeiger


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**WEST POINT, Georgia (CNN)** -- A community that seemed on the road to becoming a ghost town has taken a turn toward prosperity despite the recession, thanks to an automaker.

Korean car manufacturer Kia plans to open a sprawling automobile factory in tiny West Point, Georgia, by the end of the year. The boon has already spurred economic growth -- and just plain excitement -- among residents, said Mayor Drew Ferguson.

"We jokingly call it Kia-ville," said Ferguson, a 42-year-old dentist helping to oversee expansion of West Point, population 3,500. The announcement is drawing workers and businesses to the community about 80 miles south of Atlanta.

"The revitalization of the community is touching every aspect," Ferguson said. "We have infrastructure projects, new subdivisions going up, hotel professional services that are all needed to support the massive manufacturing."

The plant, which will make Kia's Sorento sport utility vehicle, has hired 500 workers. By the time the factory opens, Kia hopes to hire 2,000 more. A smattering of [Kia](#) supply companies will eventually employ 7,500 additional workers.  [Watch the town's excitement about the new factory »](#)

"A lot of people feel that we are the savior for this area, which I hope we will be," said Randy Jackson, director of human resources for the manufacturing plant. "We got 43,013 applications; 75 percent of those applications came from Georgia, and about 20 percent came from our neighboring state of Alabama."

Some of those applications are coming from auto workers around the country, including Detroit, Michigan, Jackson said.

Overall, West Point stands to gain 20,000 jobs as a result of the factory during the next five years, Ferguson said.

Georgia's 9.7 percent [unemployment](#) rate reported in May is about the same as the June national average of 9.5 percent, according to federal statistics. The U.S. Department of Labor reported unemployment in a five-county region including West Point at 8.6 percent.

To secure the \$1.2 billion Kia plant, state and local officials helped assemble land from a former cattle farm to create a 2,200-acre industrial park. They also locked in about \$400 million in tax breaks and other economic incentives.

"We think the investment will pay off big time," Ferguson said. "We're already seeing it. But it's not only in the dollars, but in the hope and opportunity, and the ability to create new jobs."

Ruthann Williams invested her life savings to buy and open the Irish Bred Pub on West Point's Main Street. Now she commutes to work 45 minutes a day from her North [Georgia](#) home.

"I came here because of Kia," Williams said. "We jumped in with both feet and have not looked back one time."

### **'My little town was gonna die'**

Plans for the new factory have transformed a community that during the past ten years has been becoming a ghost town. Textile mills that once defined West Point shut down in the 1990s, leaving many out of work.

Debbie Williams, co-owner of the popular Roger's Bar-B-Que, was worried her business would go under.

"We'd go downtown and there was nothing there," Williams said. "I thought my little town was gonna die."

Margaret McManus was laid off last year when the textile mill she worked for closed. The 52-year-old went back to school to study information technology. In April she landed a job as a trainer with Daehan Solutions Georgia, a parts supplier for Kia. McManus said she didn't think in a million years she'd be making car parts.

"The job that I used to do for a long time, we thought we'd retire there," McManus said. "It feels good to go to work everyday and have something to do."

The signs of transformation in West Point are everywhere. There's new construction, including the city's first new subdivision in 25 years. And businesses that once struggled are feeling the uptick.

Williams recently replaced her restaurant floor because of all the new foot traffic.

"We see a lot of people we don't know now. They want to see where the Kia site's gonna be built," Williams said. "We always say if we can get them in here one time, we can get them back, and they come. They're coming back."

Tom Oswald, owner of West Point Shoe Outlet, said last year was his best year ever.

"Once Kia announced they were opening we've sold mostly steel-toed shoes for construction workers," he said. "Now we're selling wingtips for men and heels for ladies."

And Malcolm Malone, who runs M&M Car Wash, said business is booming.

"It's been up at least 70 percent," said the 44-year-old West Point native. "It's like Christmas."

Or perhaps a little divine intervention deserves credit, as a West Point sign pointed out: "Thank You Jesus For Bringing Kia to Our Town."

### **New flavors**

On Main Street, residents are sampling new flavors that have come to West Point since the announcement.

Asian restaurants and businesses are popping up. The old Pizza Hut has transformed into a Korean Bar-B-Que, and the southern staple KFC is now a popular Korean eatery called Young's Garden.

Resident Christy Magbee said West Point is starting to feel like a melting pot.

"You got the culture coming in. You don't have to travel to Atlanta anymore. It's starting to come here," she said.

"The old downtown is new again. It's an exciting time," Ferguson said. "For us there's a light at the end of the tunnel."

CNN's Alina Cho contributed to this report.

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