

Adaptive reuse, community partnerships, nimble planning

Why HexArmor? This project serves as an example of capturing growth opportunities that already exist within the community, demonstrating ways in which adaptively reusing obsolete buildings can mutually benefit both the industrial user and the local community. The City of Grand Rapids recognized this opportunity, proactively streamlining their zoning and approval processes to be nimble and reasonable when development opportunities such as HexArmor's relocation arise.

Asset Class: mid-sized modern manufacturing. HexArmor was founded in Grand Rapids in 2002 and has grown significantly over the years. The company provides industrial personal protection equipment (IPPE), primarily offering cut and puncture-resistant gloves and armguards, and recent product line expansions that include safety eyewear.

Tools Used:



1. Roles, Responsibilities, and the Development Process ●○○○



2. Master Planning for Industrial ●○○○



3. Conducting Exploratory Meetings ●○○○



7. Industrial Zoning District Guidelines ●○○○



10. The Development Review Process ●●○○



13. Brownfields and Incentives ●●○○

GRAND RAPIDS, MI

HexArmor

Site Context and Facility Details

HexArmor's Continued Growth in Grand Rapids

HexArmor relocated to 640 Leffingwell Ave NE to replace and enlarge its footprint from the previous facility at 2000 Oak Industrial Drive NE, responding to increased headcount, warehousing needs, and a broader product line expansion (enabled by a strategic partnership with the Germany-based uvex Safety Group). This \$8.7 million project was a complete revitalization of a vacant, 52,000-square foot obsolete building.

Continued expansion. On January 30, 2025, local economic development group The Right Place, in partnership with the Michigan Economic Development Corporation (MEDC), announced HexArmor's plans to expand its headquarters further with an \$11.4 million investment. The expansion added 59,000 square feet to its existing Grand Rapids facility to meet the company's global growth. This project will double the company's warehouse capacity and enlarge office spaces, creating 100 new jobs in the process.

Site Location: 640 Leffingwell Avenue NE

By the Numbers

Building size:
111,000 square feet
Current: 52,000 square feet
Expansion: 59,000 square feet

Project cost:
2019: \$8.7 million
2025 expansion: \$11.4 million

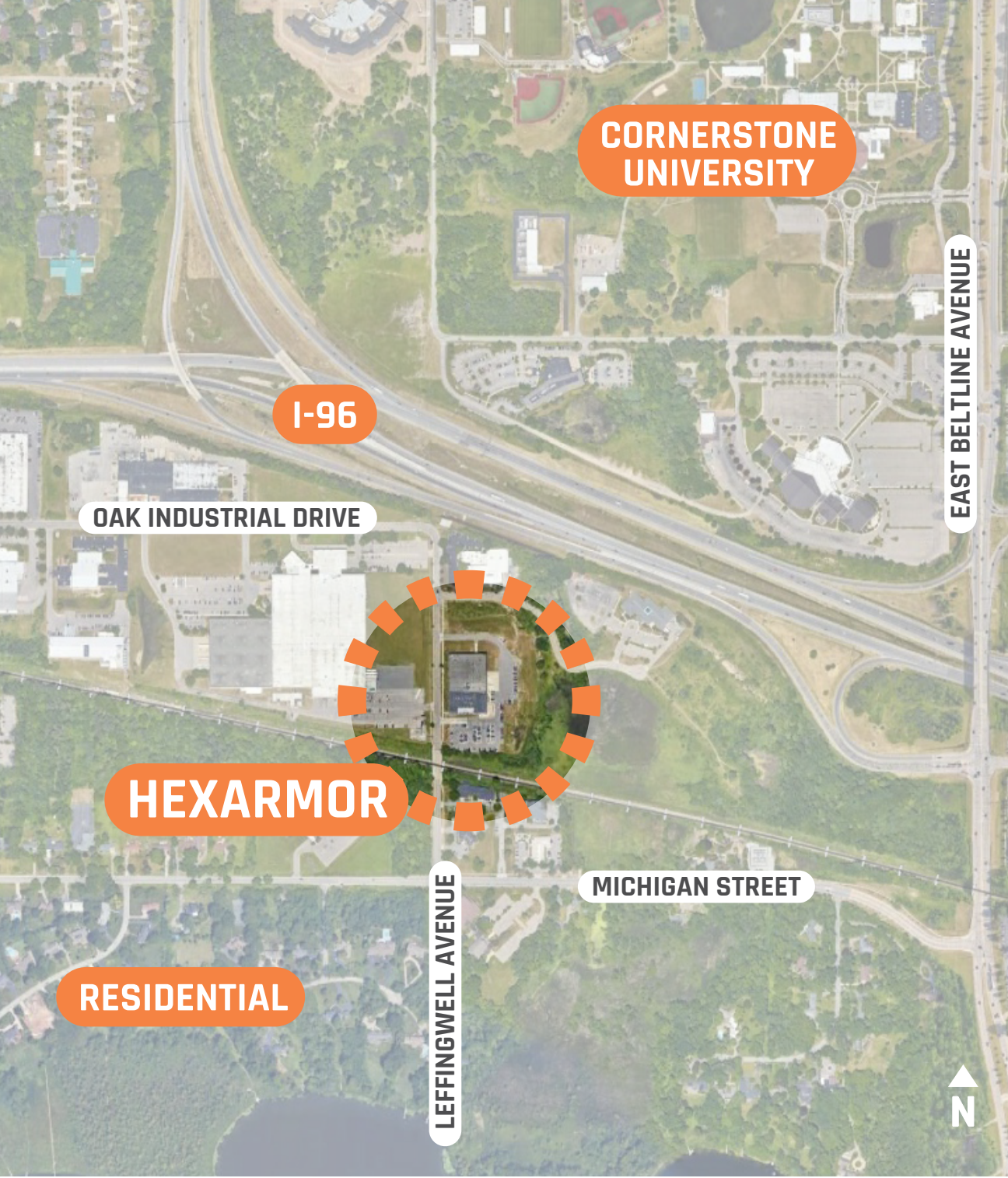
Number of jobs:
280 full-time employees
Current: 180 full-time employees (50-person increase from Oak Industrial location)
Expansion: 100 full-time employees

Site Context

Oak Industrial Park was created in the 1970s to facilitate industrial development in the City of Grand Rapids. It is one of the only remaining viable industrial areas within the City because many former industrial buildings have been converted into mixed-use. City leaders have maintained that the Oak Industrial Park must remain as industrial to preserve jobs within the City and have worked to prevent the intrusion of non-industrial uses into the area.

Initially located at 2000 Oak Industrial Drive NE in Grand Rapids, HexArmor decided to relocate and expand its headquarters to 640 Leffingwell within the Oak Industrial Park in 2019. Their new location can be easily accessed by the I-196 Interchange and East Beltline Avenue. Various other industrial uses surround the site, as Leffingwell Avenue turns into Oak Industrial Drive. Cornerstone University is located just north of the site beyond the highway, Aquinas College is southwest of the site, and residential neighborhoods exist to the south and west of the site.

The area is located on a bus line, but there was historically a lack of sidewalks and bike facilities. Over the course of the past decade, the City of Grand Rapids has worked to add sidewalks that connect to transit stops and refurbish an overpass that extends over I-196 to connect to northern neighborhoods with a new sidewalk.



← **DOWNTOWN GRAND RAPIDS** 3 MILES WEST OF SITE

← **AQUINAS COLLEGE** 6 MILES SOUTH WEST OF SITE

Adaptive Reuse and Incentives

This project adaptively reused an existing industrial building, blending into the existing context of the area came naturally.

This is one of the reasons why adaptive reuse can strengthen a project's feasibility right from the start. Revitalizing a building that previously housed an industrial or similar use often ensures that the proper zoning, infrastructure, and compatibility with surrounding uses exists for a new industrial project.

Adaptive reuse has the potential to benefit the developer and the community.

The building at 640 Leffingwell had stood largely vacant for years before HexArmor acquired it. Through a complete \$8.7 million renovation, HexArmor transformed the structure into a modern, fully functional headquarters featuring a mix of office space, light manufacturing/assembly floors, and warehousing capacity designed for contemporary PPE production and distribution demands. In addition to restoring productive

use to a property that might otherwise have remained blighted, the project delivered inherent sustainability benefits by reusing the existing building rather than demolishing it. The revitalized facility now supports local manufacturing while also demonstrating how thoughtful adaptive reuse can produce high-performing, innovative, and environmentally responsible workspaces.

Tax Incentives

The City of Grand Rapids approved a P.A. 146 Obsolete Property Rehabilitation Act (OPRA) tax abatement in support of the company's revitalization of the new facility. OPRA provides tax incentives to developers for rehabilitating older properties. Typically, this means a temporary exemption or reduction of property taxes on the increased value resulting from renovations. These incentives reduce the financial burden of updating older buildings to meet modern standards, allowing companies to invest in new equipment, improve working conditions, and expand operations without being immediately penalized by higher taxes.



Further Reading

State of Michigan OPRA Overview



Original building



P.A. 146 Obsolete Property Rehabilitation Act

An OPRA incentive helps reduce the tax burden associated with redeveloping an obsolete or deteriorated building, which is often one of the biggest financial barriers in adaptive reuse projects. By freezing the property's taxable value for up to 12 years, OPRA allows developers to invest in rehabilitation without immediately absorbing higher taxes triggered by their improvements. This makes it more feasible to modernize older structures. For communities, OPRA supports reinvestment in existing buildings and brings vacant or underused spaces back into productive use.

Planning Policies and Local Partnerships

City Of Grand Rapids Zoning

The HexArmor parcel is zoned as Special District Industrial Transportation: The Industrial-Transportation District (IT) was established to reflect the goals and objectives of the Grand Rapids Master Plan for a wide range of light industrial and manufacturing uses, heavy manufacturing and processing of raw materials. Neither a special land use nor rezoning was required for this property, and the Grand Rapids Planning Department has proactively prepared for industrial development.

Creating flexible rules so developers can “play in the sandbox.”

The Grand Rapids ordinance includes provisions that allow “administrative departures,” or waivers, allowing planning staff to use a more flexible approach to suit a project’s needs. In this case, HexArmor wanted a rooftop entertainment space and meeting room that exceeded the allowable building height. Given the size of the building and rooftop appurtenance, it was approved as a minor deviation.

Additionally, Grand Rapids planning staff set the public hearing so that HexArmor needed to only appear at one planning commission for its approval. The planning commission did not table the item, nor was the project required to go to the City Commission for review.

The Right Place and the Michigan Economic Development Corporation

The Right Place in Grand Rapids is the region’s leading non-profit economic development organization, focused on attracting, retaining, and growing businesses in key sectors like manufacturing, tech, and life sciences to create jobs and investment, making Greater Grand Rapids a thriving center for innovation and commerce. In partnership with MEDC, a \$350,000 Michigan Business Development Program performance-based grant was provided to HexArmor to assist them in their 2019 facility relocation project. The Right Place also connected HexArmor to workforce development resources at West Michigan Works! to assist with employee training.

The Right Place and MEDC continue to support the forward progress of HexArmor in Grand Rapids through additional financial assistance amidst the company’s current expansion project, providing a \$700,000 grant from the Michigan Business Development Program.

HexArmor has long-standing partnerships that have assisted in their continual growth in Grand Rapids. These partnerships have been steadfast in showing their investment in HexArmor through providing funding and resources for both their 2019 relocation and adaptive reuse project as well as their 2025 expansion project. Without these relationships, funding, and tax incentives, the project may not have been feasible.

Your zoning should allow for beneficial projects, not inhibit them.

The planning department has the discretion to make reasonable deviations from typical requirements on a case by case basis. Had the City of Grand Rapids stayed stringent to the zoning requirements for HexArmor’s proposed rooftop, they would have rendered an incredible project amenity unfeasible on the project’s timeline.

Not all planning requirements best serve a project; a nimble planning commission trusts their instincts and makes decisions in alignment with the wellbeing of its community and design best practices.

“HexArmor is strongly committed to growth in the City of Grand Rapids, and we feel this vibrant community is the best place for both our business and employees. We’re grateful for the support of The Right Place and their partners at the MEDC and City of Grand Rapids as we enter this next phase of growth.”

- Steve VanErmen, President and CEO of HexArmor

What lessons can others take from HexArmor?

HexArmor's relocation and expansion into 640 Leffingwell Ave NE demonstrates how a coordinated approach built on adaptive reuse, cross-sector partnerships, and targeted public incentives can transform an obsolete industrial facility into a forward-thinking employment center.

By choosing to rehabilitate a vacant, deteriorating building rather than construct new space elsewhere, the company utilized existing infrastructure and revitalized a structure that had lost its economic purpose. The modernization of the site into a functional mix of office, light manufacturing, and warehousing space illustrates the power of adaptive reuse to efficiently meet contemporary operational needs while reinforcing the long-term vitality of an established industrial corridor.

The project was made possible through strong collaboration among HexArmor, The Right Place, MEDC, the City of Grand Rapids, along with use of the Obsolete Property Rehabilitation Act incentive, which helped close the financial gap of renovating an underperforming asset. These partnerships aligned business growth with community objectives, demonstrating how coordinated public-private support and well-targeted incentives can catalyze private investment, retain and grow jobs, and transform aging industrial real estate into a future-focused headquarters.

Adaptive reuse provides a strong foundation for feasibility.

Starting from scratch is not always necessary, and "new" is not always better. Using an existing building reduces upfront costs, shortens construction timelines, and avoids many of the uncertainties of new development. Industrial buildings often already have the structural capacity, infrastructure, and zoning needed for modern operations, making them strong candidates for reinvestment.

Local partnerships matter.

The Right Place and MEDC played a critical role in the 2019 relocation, facilitating coordination, financing, workforce training support, and the incentives applications. They have shown their continued support by helping finance the 2025 expansion project representing the strength of this public-private partnership. City staff and the planning commission supported the use of property tax abatements to secure new investment and jobs in the City.

Incentive policies can be mutually beneficial.

The OPRA public incentive made this substantial renovation project financially viable for HexArmor while also giving new life to an unused space in the community that may have otherwise been demolished. Incentives of this sort work by equipping developers with the means to make a substantial impact on vacant industrial spaces, which directly benefits the host community.

Space for industrial growth exists without the need for sprawl.

By revitalizing an existing industrial building rather than building on undeveloped land, the project avoided greenfield development, supporting sustainable development and efficient infrastructure use. When a use can feasibly locate within an existing industrial area, regional land use goals are advanced, and residents are more likely to support the project.

Consider flexibility for future expansion when choosing a site.

The 2019 renovation allowed HexArmor to grow, but the 2025 expansion illustrates that planning for flexibility—having room on site, available infrastructure, industrial zoning—can pay off as a company grows. HexArmor's site selection ensured that their investment would be able to sustain and evolve with their future needs. The City's willingness to be flexible in the development approvals process helped facilitate redevelopment and new construction with minimal delay, helping to control HexArmor's cost of development.

A proactive city made the process smooth.

The City of Grand Rapids' master plan and zoning ordinance made site redevelopment easy to facilitate. The master plan established the policy framework and future land use that identified projects like HexArmor, while the City's zoning district created a clear pathway for HexArmor's development to move forward. Because this type of land use was already established in City documents, the review process was simple and fast.