

# The GM plant's closure three decades ago put Fairfield on the brink. Here's how it clawed back.



Pictured is the Fisher Body plant marquee at the corner of Dixie Highway and Symmes Road. It was built in 1946 and operated until 1987. It closed its doors in 1989. PROVIDED/UAW LOCAL 233 RETIREES

Photo: Staff Writer

**By Michael D. Pitman, Staff Writer**

FAIRFIELD —

The city of Fairfield and thousands of employees were shocked by the news.

In 1986, General Motors announced that it would close the Fisher Body plant, the beating heart of the city's economy. The 2,500 jobs phased out over three years, until, 30 years ago, the plant shut down for good.

“It was a scary time,” said Tim Bachman, the city's former development services director. But present-day Fairfield would look much different if leaders had not responded to the closing as they did. Using tax incentives, open land and salesmanship, Fairfield lured a variety of businesses that helped it diversify its base and bring itself back from the brink of possible financial ruin.

GM closed the auto parts stamping facility on Dixie Highway and Symmes Road in the first quarter of 1989, though its operations stopped in 1987. The 2,500 employees who worked at the plant when its closure was announced equated to 28 percent of the city's income tax revenues, or about \$1.7 million.

“The initial thought was (whether) the city was going to survive in terms of an economic base standpoint,” said Bachman, who was named Development Services director in 1987.

“There was some serious belt-tightening at that point as GM was closing down and Cincinnati Financial was coming on board.”

The auto part stamping plant opened in 1946 at the corner of Dixie Highway and Symmes Road as the Body by Fisher Hamilton Plant.

At its largest, Fisher Body employed as many as 5,000 people, and 2,500 worked there when GM announced in 1986 it would shut down operations.



Pictured are undated company headshots of employees at Fisher Body in Fairfield.  
PROVIDED/UAW LOCAL 233 RETIREES

Photo: Staff Writer

Ed Hassler, a GM employee who would later become the UAW Local 233 president, remembers standing next to the plant manager and telling him, “I’ll believe it when I see it.”

“It was kind of hard to understand the reasoning behind it,” Hassler said.

Hassler started at Fisher Body in 1977 and was one of the last people to leave the plant in 1989 as equipment was being moved out. It was a crucial facility in Fairfield, and it was estimate one job at the plant supported six other jobs in the economy at places like restaurants, bars and businesses.

“Jobs like this, no matter what, has an impact on other jobs,” Hassler said.

But the labor was hard work, said Bob Link, who took a buyout after a decade of service to the plant in 1987. . He recalled that first 90 days was the most difficult, especially as a 21-year-old trying to work and go to school.

“You weren’t allowed to turn down overtime (in that first 90 days),” he said.



Bob Link, at left, is pictured inside the Fisher Body plant in 1979. This is one of the rare photos inside the plant. PROVIDED/BOB LINK

Photo: Staff Writer

It was also a loud place because of the stamping machines and large pieces of equipment. But in 1986, when GM announced the closure, Link said, “It was so quiet.”

It was a surprise for Link and others because after dropping in production ranks among the 11 stamping plants, the Fairfield plant was the top Fisher Body plant before the announced the closure.

“That’s what was so surprising,” said Link, who founded Advanced Video Data Services. Jake Booth, who started at the plant in 1949 and retired in 1987, recalled being told the plant would close if the production wasn’t picked up. He said people didn’t believe it “because it was too big.”

### **Fairfield’s survival**

Fairfield leaders committed to ensuring they didn’t rely so heavily on one business in the future. From 1980 to 1990, the city’s population jumped nearly by 9,000 residents, and it continued to grow.. Officials knew their existing revenues would not be enough with the anticipated growth. So the city decided to invest in its future.

The plant stopped operations in 1987 but phased its closure to the first quarter of 1989 as they moved out equipment in the interim. But Fairfield wasn’t just responding to the lost tax revenues. It also had to figure out how to pay for a plan to fix the flooding issues of the Pleasant Run Creek, which then-Councilman Mark Sharringhausen said “was going to be quite expensive to fix.”



Pictured is a card employees carried while inside the Fisher Body plant. Inside it showed a layout of the building. MICHAEL D. PITMAN

In the late 1980s, City Council decided to put an income tax levy and a pair of bond issues on the ballot to address the flooding needs. Voters rejected them all.

Voters were clearly telling the council to live within the existing revenues. City leaders were faced with the question, “What do we do now?”

Fairfield had a lot of vacant land on Ohio 4 and Seward Road, so staff focused efforts to grow and diversity businesses on that area, Bachman said.

“It made sense in terms of the migration of industry at that point, all along Interstate 75 was full and people, as they were expanding, we’re looking for different locations,” he said.

Sharringhausen said the state and federal governments were also growing tax incentive deals for businesses, which Fairfield embraced. Bachman and Sharringhausen said the city would have been eventually seen growth, but not to the extent it did.

“It would have happened regardless, but the city’s aggressiveness in terms of incentives helped build it more quickly,” Bachman said. “At that time, incentives were relatively new so we were on the cutting edge in terms of a lot of that.”

Offering the incentives were needed to entice businesses because Bachman said the city wanted to “make sure this was going to happen.”

“Little did any of us know that section of Ohio 4 would blossom as it has,” he said. “It’s just such a phenomenal thing in 30 years in terms of a great economic base.”

### **The future of the city**

China-based Panda Motor Group purchased the GM plant a few years after it closed and made an attempt to create an industrial park. In 2005, Boston-based First Highland purchased the property. It’s now Fisher Park Industrial Center, owned by Boston-based Plymouth Reit.

Fairfield continues to learn from lessons of Fisher Body's closure, and continue to look to diversify its business base.



The city of Fairfield learned in the late 1980s to build a diversified business base after Fisher Body plant, which contributed roughly \$1.7 million to its tax base, closed. Fairfield Development Services Director Greg Kathman said the city continues to diversify its business base by attracting businesses to vacant properties and undeveloped land.

MICHAEL D. PITMAN/STAFF

“Our focus now, I would say, is twofold,” said Fairfield Development Services Director Greg Kathman.

First, the city wants to maximize open acres of land to bring in high-paying and quality jobs. There are about 110 acres west of Gilmore Road and nearly 30 acres next to Mercy Health-Fairfield at Gilmore and Mack roads. Both areas about a half-mile north of Interstate 275.

“That’s pretty unusual, that’s pretty prime property,” Kathman said of the nearly 140 acres of undeveloped land along Gilmore and Mack.

Second, the city looks for redevelopment opportunities, and in some cases “properties have outlived their useful life and (buildings) need to be torn down and rebuilt in a more modern and productive capacity.”

But the key to any development “is active and invested ownership,” which can be found in most of the city, Kathman said.

“If the ownership of the property is actively pursuing opportunities and invested in the long-term viability in their property, then generally things turn out well,” he said.