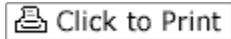




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New call center could bring 1,500 jobs to Akron

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As many as 1,500 new jobs could result from the opening of a new call center in the old Firestone Bank building on Akron's South Main Street.

The business, PlusOne Communications, is expected to announce the hiring binge at a news conference this morning at the former bank.

PlusOne President Robert Madden of Hudson said the Akron operations will start with 30 employees in July and should build up its ranks by 50 to 60 new employees a month. The workers will answer consumer health-care and communications industry calls for clients.

Madden said the venture has already invested more than \$5 million in equipment and renovating the bank. The building is owned by Madden's wife, Jill Bacon-Madden.

Bacon-Madden purchased the building for \$2 from the city in 2007. The city had previously purchased it for \$1 from the former Bank One.

Akron officials estimate the city has spent about \$1.5 million to improve sidewalks, lighting, parking and landscaping.

The Firestone Bank was built in 1958 near the Firestone Tire & Rubber Co. complex. Bank One took over the site from 1982 to about 1998.

Robert Madden said the venture is designed to provide a higher level of service than a traditional call center.

PlusOne workers, Madden said, will have special expertise in the products they are representing when fielding calls from consumers.

"What we've found is [call center] quality has gone down so fast that they've lost customers," he said. "Now those same clients are looking for places and ways to improve their quality and bring back quality of the entire product line and that starts with the person [customers] talk with on the phone."

The company's workers will be paid \$20,000 to \$30,000. Mid-level managers will make \$35,000 to \$45,000 a year with some upper managers fetching \$60,000 to \$100,000 a year.

The employment will include other benefits including health care, he said.

"We want to help the people of Akron," Madden said. "We have a great labor work force here. We have people who are disciplined. They show up for work on time. They work hard when they are working."

Phone and computer stations are already set up on the first floor of the building. The upper two floors will eventually be set up for additional workers.

Akron Mayor Don Plusquellic said the new business "is a tremendous infusion of jobs and a significant investment in the neighborhood."

Warner Mendenhall, who is leading an effort to recall Plusquellic in a special election to be held Tuesday, said the announcement of additional jobs in the city is good news.

"I think it's great," Mendenhall said. "Anything that brings jobs to Akron is good."

The anticipated hourly pay at the new facility is in line with the national average — between \$8 and \$12 an hour, said David L. Butler, director of the Call Center Research Lab at the University of Southern Mississippi in Hattiesburg.

Call centers in the U.S. employ 2 to 3 percent of the nation's workers, he said. InfoCision already operates a large call center in the Akron area.

Bacon-Madden had her eyes on the old Firestone Bank building for many years before purchasing it.

She said about 250 workers have been toiling to improve the building since 2007.

"Everything had to be done to the building," she said. "It was a wreck."

The building had a flooded basement and asbestos.

"We took the building almost back to a shell," she said.

The renovated building — now known as the Verge Building — earned the moniker for its prominent V-shaped beams that hold up the building.

Bacon-Madden, the daughter of retired Akron Community Foundation Executive Director Jody Bacon, previously worked in economic development and communications for the Akron Regional Development Board.

Madden said his wife is already looking at "a couple of other spots in the Akron area" as well as outside of the Akron area where their fledgling business could expand in the future.

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