

# Oakland County's International Development Efforts

By Stephen W. Huber



## FAST FACTS

**More than 900 firms from 38 countries have business locations in Oakland County.**

**Oakland County is one of the 10 wealthiest counties in the United States with a population of more than 1 million people.**

**Oakland County has more than 42,000 businesses.**

**T**hink of popular international business addresses and you might come up with Hong Kong, Paris, or London. Perhaps you're keen on Sydney, Bangkok, or Seoul. Depending on your preferences, any number of places may be on your list.

One place not likely to be included on that list is Oakland County, Michigan. It should be.

For more than 20 years, Oakland County—through County Executive L. Brooks Patterson and his Department of Economic Development & Community Affairs—has been globetrotting in search of international firms interested in expanding into the United States market. The county entices international firms with its strategic location as the heart of the automobile industry, its proximity to the East Coast and Ontario

(which has 80 percent of Canada's gross domestic product), and its highly skilled and brainy workforce as factors that simply can't be ignored.

"They came to Oakland County when Detroit was still the Motor City," said Patterson, who is the architect and driving force behind the global attraction strategy. "For us, it started with auto and now there's medical, technology, communications, engineering, and others. We established a reputation as a great place to live, work, and raise a family. It's a reputation we've earned."<sup>1</sup>

Oakland County competes for business not just with other counties but other states and even countries. When it comes to international attraction, the numbers speak for themselves: more than 900 firms from 38 countries have business locations here.

Patterson is pleased by the number of firms, which increases every year, although he's not surprised. Neither is Irene Spanos, his director of economic development. She cites with a measure of pride the compliment paid to the county in 2012 by Aaron Brickman, a top official of the U.S. Department of Commerce.<sup>2</sup>

"He said there were only two places in the United States that did international attraction well—Fairfax, Virginia and Oakland County, Michigan," Spanos said. "Fairfax only has 350 international firms and we have over 900. I didn't realize we were so far advanced when compared to other counties but to see it recognized on a federal level, that's a real compliment."<sup>3</sup>

More than half of the international firms in Oakland County have roots in Japan (203), Germany (185), or Canada (84). According to a 2012 survey by the Southeast Michigan Council of Governments, Oakland County has 51 percent of the international firms in the seven-county Southeast Michigan region, which includes Wayne, Oakland, and Macomb counties.

This is not by accident. Oakland County aggressively courts international businesses. Oakland County's business development team essentially has two functions: attract investment and retain investment. In the past 12 months, team members have been to China, the United Arab Emirates, Japan, Germany, Italy, South Korea, Belgium, Denmark, Singapore, and Canada. That doesn't include multiple domestic trips to various trade shows promoting Oakland County or visits by dignitaries from other countries who meet with Patterson, Spanos, and Deputy County Executive Matthew Gibb to test the waters of international expansion.

Patterson does not see the influx of international companies as a threat to the United States or the domestic workforce. He

### A Sampling of Notable International Companies with Operations in Oakland County

- Robert Bosch LLC (Germany)
- Continental Automotive (Germany)
- Denso International (Japan)
- FANUC Robotics (Japan)
- Faurecia (France)
- Hitachi Automotive (Japan)
- LG Chem (South Korea)
- Magna International (Canada)
- Tata Technologies (India)
- Valeo (France)

### Home Countries of International Firms Located in Oakland County

Country	Firms	Country	Firms
Japan	203	Israel	4
Germany	185	Singapore	4
Canada	84	Australia	3
United Kingdom	70	Brazil	3
France	65	Denmark	3
South Korea	39	Norway	3
Italy	36	Taiwan	3
Switzerland	34	New Zealand	2
India	30	Greece	1
Netherlands	29	Malaysia	1
China	28	Monaco	1
Sweden	17	Nigeria	1
Ireland	10	Poland	1
Luxembourg	10	Russia	1
Austria	7	Saudi Arabia	1
Belgium	7	South Africa	1
Finland	5	Turkey	1
Mexico	5	United Arab Emirates	1
Spain	5	Venezuela	1

***“For our kids to be able to compete, they needed to learn Chinese—to read it, understand it. Our biggest competition will be the Chinese.”***



noted that Gibb and Senior Business Development Representative Alan Weber were courting companies in Asia as he spoke.

“It all starts with a job,” Patterson said. “These companies are creating jobs for American workers in Oakland County. No one has complained to me.”

The fact that Oakland County has an enviable quality of life makes the pitch an easy one to deliver:

- More than 1,400 lakes and rivers
- 89,000 acres of parkland
- One of the 10 wealthiest counties in the United States (with a population of more than 1 million people)
- Excellent public and private schools and universities
- 72 public and private golf courses

The business case is also compelling. Proximity to General Motors, Chrysler, and Ford is an obvious selling point. There are others. The county is fiscally sound, operates on a three-year balanced budget, and is AAA bond-rated. More than 50 percent of Global Fortune 500 companies have business locations here. Forty-three percent of county residents have college degrees compared with 29 percent nationally. The county has more than 42,000 businesses and a population of 1.2 million people. Oakland County International Airport is one of the busiest general aviation airports in the world with 150,000 takeoffs and landings a year and an economic impact of \$175 million annually.

Patterson, who can never be accused of complacency, rattles off a few more stats to make his point. He then settles on an achievement of which he is particularly proud: convincing the 28 public school districts in Oakland County to offer classes in Mandarin language and culture as part of the regular school curriculum.

“When I was in China [in 2007], I had this epiphany,” Patterson said. “I heard there was more English spoken in China than in America. It stunned me. But then I realized that China will soon be the largest economy in the world. For our kids to be able to compete, they needed to learn Chinese—to read it, understand it. Our biggest competition will be the Chinese.”

It didn't take Patterson long to act. He pitched the Mandarin program in his State of the County speech in 2008. Admittedly, not everyone embraced the idea. But some districts—Oxford in particular—have exceeded even Patterson's expectations.

Oxford Schools Superintendent Dr. William Skilling established an exchange program and now has 13 sister schools in China, an international high school in Fushun, and will soon be opening a second school in Chongqing.

“No one does it better than Oxford does,” Patterson said.

Patterson believes that as the economy continues to improve, Oakland County will continue to be an international destination for companies, and he is committed to making it increasingly difficult to say no to his county.

“I have a lot of confidence in my team,” Patterson said. “Our efforts are good for the county and good for Michigan.” ■



*Stephen W. Huber is marketing and communications officer for Oakland County economic development. He was an award-winning columnist and court reporter for The Oakland Press and The Fort Worth Star-Telegram. Huber covered cases in county and federal courts and the United States Supreme Court, including the trials of Dr. Jack Kevorkian. He was the first beat writer for the Dallas Stars hockey team. He also officiated at the 1980 Winter Olympics in Lake Placid, N.Y.*

## ENDNOTES

1. Interview with L. Brooks Patterson, county executive, Oakland County Department of Economic Development & Community Affairs, in Waterford, Michigan (September 12, 2013).
2. SelectUSA Executive Director Aaron Brickman, remarks to the Michigan delegation (February 2013). SelectUSA was created by an executive order of the president and is housed within the U.S. Department of Commerce.
3. Interview with Irene Spanos, director of economic development, Oakland County Department of Economic Development & Community Affairs, in Waterford, Michigan (September 12, 2013).