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Heavy metal: Local nonprofit to spur state's metals industry

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Vijay Kamineni

Submitted

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If a newly formed nonprofit organization based in Bowling Green meets its goals, the Bluegrass State will soon be associated as closely with steel and aluminum as it now is with thoroughbreds and sipping whiskey.

The Metals Innovation Initiative, launched in September and housed at Western Kentucky University's Innovation Campus at Nashville Road and Campbell Lane, has brought together industry leaders, educators and government officials who share the goal of rebranding Kentucky into the preeminent destination for metals innovation.



This may sound like a mission impossible for the fledgling MI2, but a look at the state's industrial makeup reveals why this seemingly far-fetched scheme may be easier to pull off than one of those convoluted Tom Cruise movie plots.

According to the Kentucky Cabinet for Economic Development, the state is home to more than 230 metals-related operations employing nearly 25,000 people.

Evidence is right here in southcentral Kentucky, home to such manufacturing powerhouses as Logan Aluminum, Bowling Green Metalforming and Kobe Aluminum.

“That may be the best-kept secret about Kentucky,” said Vijay Kamineni, an engineer at Russellville's Logan Aluminum who is now CEO of MI2. “Most people don't think about it as a metals leader.”

Kamineni and executives at MI2's eight founding industries aim to change that through a nonprofit

created to promote advanced research and talent development in Kentucky's metals industry.

The vision, according to Kamineni, is for Kentucky to form an ecosystem that fosters innovation, training and synergy within what is already a vibrant metals sector.

Such an industry "cluster" is likened by Kamineni to California's technology-driven Silicon Valley and North Carolina's Research Triangle.

Kamineni said work on establishing MI2 dates back to at least 2019.

Metals-industry leaders, researchers at state universities and Kentucky economic development officials were simultaneously promoting the idea of building on the presence of metals companies in the state.



Sam Ford, executive director of the AccelerateKY nonprofit that focuses on tapping into the potential of Kentucky's innovators and entrepreneurs, worked with Kamineni to put together a white paper that spelled out the vision for MI2.

That led to a March meeting of industry leaders, higher education professionals and Gov. Andy Beshear.

With funding commitments from Beshear and eight companies – Kobe Aluminum, Logan Aluminum, North American Stainless, Novelis, Nucor, River Metals Recycling, Tri-Arrows Aluminum and Wieland – MI2 was launched in September.

“It seemed that everybody was thinking the same thing,” Ford said of MI2’s genesis, “so we thought we must be on to something.”

Now Kamineni is heading a nonprofit that has funding secured for the next two years. He said MI2’s mission now turns to research and innovation, talent attraction, environmental sustainability, grant funding and building the metals-industry ecosystem.

One of the key components of the nonprofit’s mission, Ford said, is building the training infrastructure to prepare workers for what he calls “Industry 4.0.”

“At the top of everybody’s list is developing talent for the jobs of the future,” Ford said. “How do we better

equip the workforce to take advantage of the fourth industrial revolution?

“In advanced manufacturing, workers will be using robotics and innovation in manufacturing. Workers will be co-existing with machines. That will become the norm.”

Ford believes MI2 can play a role not only in utilization of existing technologies but in creation of new ones.

“An organization like MI2 can help fill the gap between researchers at universities and commercial application,” he said. “I hope there will be opportunities for new companies to form around those new technologies.”

And that, Ford envisions, can lead to that rebranding of the Bluegrass State.

“We want to make sure Kentucky becomes synonymous with metals innovation,” he said.

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