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Brothers bring Vanair Manufacturing 'home' to Indiana

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MICHIGAN CITY | A maker of commercial-truck equipment plans a move to LaPorte County, bringing with it up to 60 jobs.

Vanair Manufacturing expects to break ground in early May on a 60,000-square-foot plant on 20 acres south of Michigan City, off of Interstate 94, said Ralph Kokot, owner and chief executive officer.

The move from New Buffalo, Mich., means a return home for company owners Kokot and brothers Greg and Dan Kokot, who grew up in East Chicago.

"We're glad to bring the company into our home state," Ralph Kokot said.

He bought the then-25-year-old company in 1997, growing it from a small subsidiary of Sullair Corp. into an independently operated manufacturer of vehicle-mounted air compressors.

Customers of the company's custom engineered equipment run the gamut from the U.S. Department of Defense to local power and water utility companies and Amish furniture makers, who use its air-powered tools.

"It's a very diverse market that we serve," Ralph Kokot said.

Vanair subsidiary, Bilt-Rite, run by Dan Kokot, will occupy space in the new facility. Bilt-Rite is an upfitter of truck chassis mounts, Dan Kokot said.

Economic incentives provided by Michigan City, LaPorte County and the state of Indiana persuaded him to make the move as the company outgrew its New Buffalo facility, Kokot said.

"The state of Indiana put together an attractive package," including tax abatement, he said.

Plans are to increase an existing work force of 44 to about 60 employees.

The company employs mechanics and assembly workers, as well as professional engineers and clerical workers. The average wage is about \$21 an hour.

The potential for further expansion will be built into the new plant. The company plans to move into the new plant by early 2008.