

Distance is no obstacle in the Greater Zurich Area

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A lot is going on in Metropolitan Zurich as major companies invest millions throughout the region – even far away from major cities, as Biogen’s mega investment in Luterbach in the canton of Solothurn shows. Municipalities in the canton of Graubünden are profiting from their proximity to the border and nature.

“We don’t know the concept of peripheral regions in Switzerland,” says Reto Lindegger, director of the Association of Swiss Communes. According to Lindegger, even the smallest of municipalities is better connected by transport infrastructure than is possible in larger countries. This is just one reason why companies are now moving even to small municipalities in Metropolitan Zurich.

In 2015, for instance, the biotechnology group Biogen chose Switzerland for its new site in the 3,500-strong town of Luterbach, close to the German and French borders in the canton of Solothurn. The company is investing around CHF 1 million to build the most advanced biotechnology factory in the world where it will employ 450 people. Says Reto Lindegger: “In this case, a small municipality was able to play up its strengths with cantonal partners on its side.” It is precisely this type of cooperation that keeps competition among locations healthy.

Hand in hand with the canton

Biogen’s request came at the right moment for Luterbach. “The canton had earlier acquired the former Cellulose Attisholz site in Luterbach as a strategic reserve. After test planning was complete, a master and zone plan had already been created,” says Luterbach’s mayor Michael Ochsenbein. As per the Swiss militia system, being mayor is not a full-time job; he is also a committed teacher.

Once the biotechnology company decided to open a site in Luterbach, everything was able to proceed quickly. An important success factor was the good cooperation between the responsible planning authorities and the economic development office. All the stakeholders pulled together to make this happen.

Land use policy is essential

The Swiss are well aware of what is needed to help companies succeed in finding a site. According to the head of business development in the canton of Solothurn, Sarah Koch, the availability of land is high on the list. In the best case, the municipality or canton already own an interesting plot of land and development is already well underway. This is less about competition than a sober analysis of the potential of the land – perhaps even across borders.

“We also strive for clear responsibilities on the side of the municipality and canton. In that way the company has a competent contact partner,” she says. Another important task is for the municipality to involve the local population. “This is typically Swiss. A transparent information policy vastly improves the likelihood that the new company will be welcomed into the community with open arms,” says Koch.

With this in mind, many municipalities take control with the help of the canton, just as the municipality of Däniken in the canton of Solothurn has done. It has 100,000 square metres of industrial land in the industrial area of Aarenfeld that it is ready to develop immediately – 70,000 square metres of which are owned by the municipality.

The periphery moves to the centre

In many cases, municipalities are recognising the potential of areas that had once been used for industrial purposes. This is the same from one end of the Greater Zurich region to the other.

The San Vittore industrial area in the canton of Graubünden was once home to a steel company. Today the 18,000 square metre area in the municipality with the same name is one of the most important cantonal employment zones, like Tardis in Landquart and Vial in Domat/Ems. It is an example of how municipalities and the canton are jointly developing these in such a manner to expand them.

San Vittore is located in the Italian-speaking area. Being located in a supposedly peripheral region is a strategic advantage: “Milan is around 100 kilometres away, Ticino just around the corner. This is an especially compelling argument for companies with a connection to Italy,” says Paolo Giorgetta, head of industry location development in the canton.

Various companies have moved to San Vittore in recent years, including the Italian company Padoan with its Swiss subsidiary last year. The global market leader for oil tanks, fuel tanks and combined tanks for commercial vehicles is focusing on development, production and sales at its San Vittore site.

Focus on the future

But Graubünden is far more than just ideal plots of land. The canton has continuously expanded its focus on science in recent years. While everyone associates Zurich with scientific excellence, few know that it is the ace up the Graubünden sleeve.

Duri Bezzola, the managing director of Academia Raetica, the umbrella organisation for university research and teaching in Graubünden, is convinced of the merits of this: “We conduct advanced research at many institutions. And even if we’re not a metropolitan area with comparable opportunities for cooperation, this is offset by the high quality of life surrounded by incomparable nature,” says Bezzola.

The best example of this is Davos. With a population of 13,000 and a recognisable name for hosting the annual World Economic Forum, the highest town in the Alps established the initiative Science City Davos. Research institutions and companies have had a long tradition of being in Davos. Many of them, such as AO Foundation, are active in the medical field. Companies such as Davos Diagnostics, a spin-off of the Swiss Institute of Allergy and Asthma Research (SIAF) bear witness to this lively network. In 2014, Allergy Campus Davos was founded to provide clinical care, research and education in the allergy and asthma field. The three partners – Christine Kühne Center for Allergy Research and Education, Hochgebirgsklinik Davos and SIAF – are now building a centre that will attract even more in the future. Because in some cases it is precisely the distance to an urban atmosphere that gives a location its strategic edge.

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