

# Potential buyers present plan for former Motorola site in Harvard

State, federal programs, TIF district are among possible funding options for multi-tenant data center

By [Katie Smith](#)

June 12, 2021 at 5:00 am CDTEExpand



Sean Stofer, COO of Green Data Center Real Estate, Inc., shows a manufacturing and packing area inside the property at the former Motorola headquarters on Thursday, June 10, 2021, in Harvard. (Matthew Apgar/Matthew Apgar)

Left relatively untouched for almost 20 years, Harvard's former Motorola campus could undergo extensive rehabilitation as it transforms into a mostly energy-independent data center that would house multiple business operations.

Leaders with the Canada-based company Green Data Real Estate Inc. are in the process of buying the 303-acre space that formerly housed an ambitious but ultimately failed Motorola manufacturing and distribution site.

Parts of the 2001 N. Division St. campus remained intact Thursday as Green Data CEO Jason Bak and Chief Operating Officer Sean Stofer led the Northwest Herald through a tour of the property.

Although empty and unlit, the office space still houses conference rooms furnished with breakaway tables and navy blue office chairs that match the drapes and carpet. Certain areas look as though staff simply went out to lunch and might return at any moment.

“This is in remarkable condition given the age,” Bak said.

Vases holding fake plants still were scattered throughout the building, and a 1997 hits album featuring the Spice Girls’ “Wannabe” sat in a CD player in the campus’ full-sized theater audio-visual room.

Those moments frozen in time, however, are surrounded by some of Green Data’s biggest challenges. Spreading mold and a nonfunctioning fire sprinkler system are chief among other needs that will require extensive rehab to bring the 1.5 million-square-foot campus within health and safety guidelines. Those basic rehabilitative tasks could cost an estimated \$12 million.

“Every sprinkler head has to be replaced,” Bak said.



Green Data Center Real Estate Inc. CEO Jason Bak shows the property at the former Motorola headquarters on Thursday, June 10, 2021, in Harvard. (Matthew Apgar/Matthew Apgar)

*[ [Explore more photos of the former Motorola site in Harvard here.](#) ]*

Green Data has a vision for the campus, but the company still is sorting out funding for its execution.

On Wednesday, the Harvard Ordinance Committee voted in favor of a resolution to conduct a feasibility study for the creation of a tax increment financing district to supply some of those funds. The resolution, which will go before the City Council on June 22, does not obligate the city to use TIF funds for the project.

TIF districts are an economic development tool that allow municipalities to set aside property tax revenue – whatever taxes come off new property value within the district – to fund infrastructure improvements, incentive agreements with companies and other initiatives aimed at improving blighted areas.

“The resolution simply allows us to get a feasibility study done to find out [if] it make economic sense,” Harvard Mayor Michael Kelly said.

Green Data also is exploring financial support through brownfield and clean energy programs, job creation incentives and other state and federal funding options, Bak said at Wednesday’s meeting.

Brownfield grants provide communities with technical assistance to assess, safely clean and sustainably reuse contaminated properties, according to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. Property-assessed clean energy programs allow property owners to finance the upfront cost of energy or other eligible improvements and pay back the costs over time through a voluntary assessment, according to the U.S. Office of Energy Efficiency and Renewable Energy.

Orders tied to a Canadian criminal case against the most recent owner, Xiao Hua “Edward” Gong, previously prevented new businesses from moving into the space. Those restrictions have since been lifted, however, allowing for a bidding process through the U.S. Marshals Service.

Left vacant for so long, however, parts of the building began to deteriorate, along with an attached local historical landmark, the William H. Coventry House.



Green Data Center Real Estate Inc. CEO Jason Bak looks out of a corner office on the fourth floor of the property at the former Motorola headquarters on Thursday, June 10, 2021 in Harvard. (Matthew Apgar/Matthew Apgar)

The McHenry County Historical Society's attempts to save the house amid litigation so far have been unsuccessful.

“It has become abundantly clear to me that nothing is going to happen with the Coventry farmstead until something happens with [the] Motorola [site],” McHenry County Historical Society Administrator Kurt Begalka said. “And the biggest problem with that is that the Coventry House was built in 1855 and is experiencing the ravages of time. The longer we wait, the less chance that there will be something left to save.”

If Green Data closes on the deal, the company is open to returning the historical landmark to the community, Bak said Thursday.

Harvard's campus would be the second part of Green Data's three-project plan. Funding plans for the company's first project in Murphysboro include \$22 million in government-guaranteed loans, \$8 million in PACE financing, \$8 million in potential monetized tax credits and \$2.3 million in monetized

solar tax credits after construction, according to a presentation that Bak showed Harvard officials Wednesday.

Installing the solar panels necessary to power the campus is top among Green Data's priority list and should take about six months, Bak and Stofer said.

According to Green Data's project timeline, construction on the property and the leasing process could begin this year, but the company has not yet closed on the Harvard property.

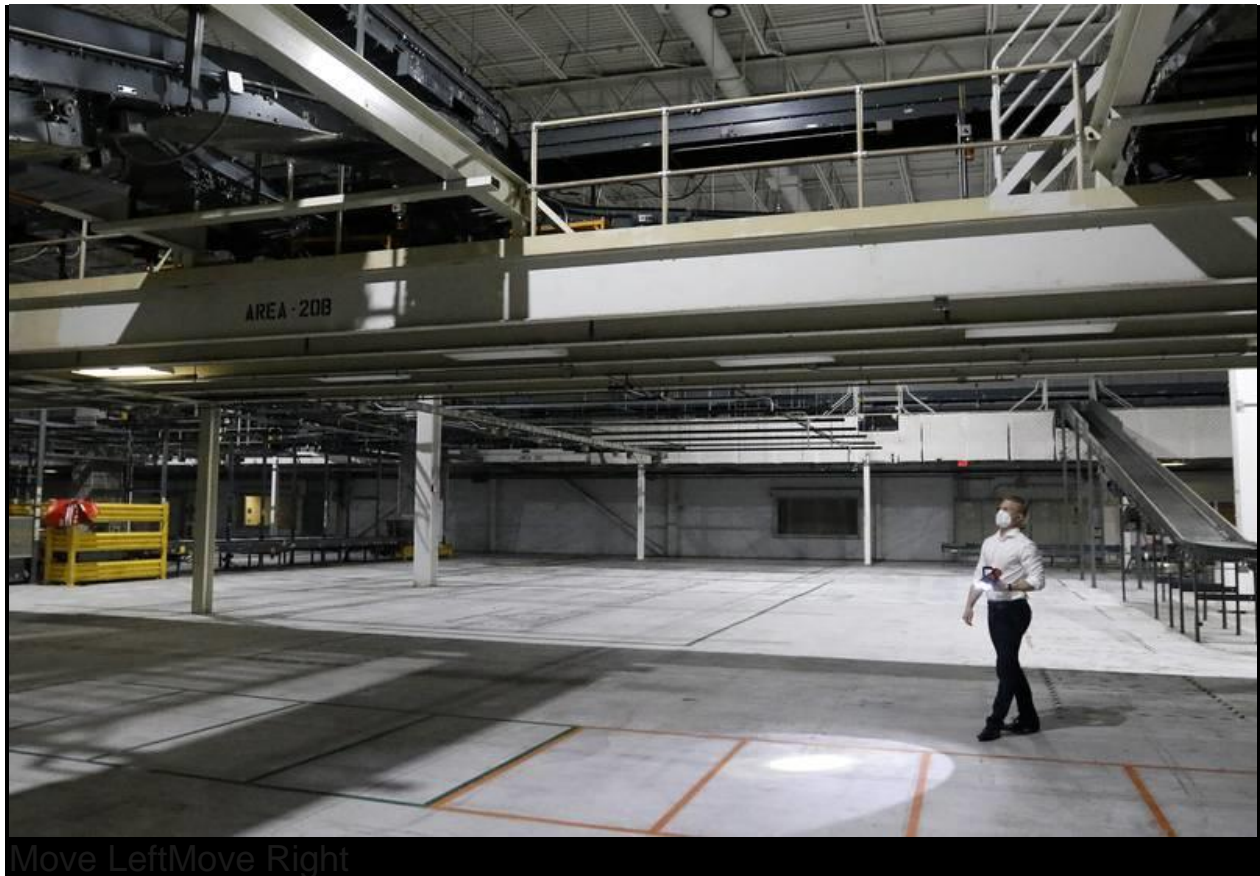
Bak originally made an offer to buy the property from Gong in 2018 but never received a response, he said. The CEO now has been in communication with Harvard officials for about a year, and closing is tentatively scheduled to take place in mid-to-late July.

"I'm still optimistic but cautious," Kelly said.

ExpandAutoplay

1 of 39Move LeftMove Right





**Motorola Harvard** Green Data Center Real Estate Inc. CEO Jason Bak walks around the Motorola logo adorning the helipad atop the property at the former Motorola headquarters on Thursday, June 10, 2021 in Harvard. (Matthew Apgar/Matthew Apgar)

City officials have been hesitant to celebrate news about potential buyers after the property went through multiple failed owners and lay vacant for 18 years.

Bak hopes that by leasing the property to other tenants, there would be less risk of a single failed business rendering the property obsolete again.

“We want to use this space to incentivize groups to come here and use our data center,” Bak said during a tour Thursday.

Green Data plans to lease about two-thirds of the property to other businesses – ideally tech-minded operations that require large amounts of energy. The company could, for example, lease part of the property to an electric vehicle manufacturer, which could use the campus’ manufacturing

space and expansive parking lot to produce and temporarily store its product, Stofer said.

The more than 1.5 million-square-foot campus also includes a 500-seat auditorium, helicopter port, fitness and day care centers and a 1,100-person-capacity cafeteria. Which of those features will survive any renovations remains to be seen and is dependent on the tenants that might occupy the space, Stofer said.

It's unknown which businesses have expressed interest in leasing part of the campus. Bak did, however, announce at Wednesday's meeting that at least one potential tenant is a video game company with 5 million followers on YouTube.

"I think Motorola was just too bespoke," Bak said. "It was too specific for one specific product. ... I think we're talking about something that can be used by a whole industry. It's not just one mobile phone manufacturer that can use it."