

Inauguration of the new innovation and production center in Biel/Bienne

13 September 2019

The spoken word applies.

Speech by Erich Fehr, Mayor of the City of Biel/Bienne

Mesdames et Messieurs;
Geschätzte Damen und Herren;
Dear visitors,

I would like to open my address by saying thank you to the management of Georg Fischer for their investment. It is a significant—and lasting—addition to Biel as a location for research and innovation.

In undertaking this major investment, Georg Fischer, as a highly innovative company, is underlining its commitment to Switzerland as a place to do business. All milling machine production in Switzerland will now be concentrated in Biel, eventually employing around 450 people. That in turn will mean that your company will attract the best engineering talent.

The City of Biel is investing in existing and new infrastructure because the city is continually growing and seeks to ensure the necessary capacity is in place. I will return to this subject shortly.

I'm very delighted to welcome you all here and congratulate you on your success. Biel, or Bienne in French, is the largest bilingual city in Switzerland. Multilingualism is part of our DNA, as you will hear in my speech today.

This area here called Bözingenfeld is a cluster of precision engineering firms and watchmakers. And there is no sign of this growth abating. In this business park, new firms intermingle with long-established local companies, and all have the space they need to conduct and develop their business.

Biel's local government, through its active land use policy, that is through its control of land, is able—and willing—to provide focused support and direction for the dynamic development of this part of the city, since, as we know, land is generally made available under planning law.

Thanks to the local government's extensive ownership of land, which has been built up over the course of a century and is still being added to in a targeted manner, we can respond swiftly to accommodate the needs of businesses. Since land as a factor of production cannot be enlarged, there is an increasing focus on the issue of density in relation to industrial and commercial use. Here, too, the large land holdings of Biel's local government and the instrument of planning law are excellent tools in guiding development.

I am glad that the economic dynamic of the City of Biel has now reached such a level that it means no land needs to be or can be made available for warehouses and the like, which create little value for the space they take up. We need skilled jobs in manufacturing and denser development of industrial and commercial sites.

Ongoing digitalization—in industry and elsewhere—means that companies are becoming more agile and have to focus on their core skills. Your company is a shining example of the comparative advantages Switzerland has as an industrial location, even in fiercely competitive international markets: high tech, precision, networking through Industry 4.0 solutions, and innovation.

And it is no accident that Georg Fischer is also one of the shareholders of the Switzerland Innovation Park Biel/Bienne, which enables and promotes industrial and applied research and development. As part of a national and international network of the Switzerland Innovation Foundation, inward research investment will be generated, Swiss innovation abilities and startups will be fostered, and research results will be translated into marketable products in accelerated fashion.

It is very important—and not a trivial matter, in view of technological catchup in other areas of the economy—that industry invests again and again in jobs in Switzerland. Your firm is a very good example of why that is important. Your business needs a broad mix of skills: engineering, specialists in precision mechanics, as well as managers and more straightforward functions. Switzerland—including our region—needs a supply of jobs in all these areas.

It is of particular value to us that Georg Fischer has acknowledged that we made available one of our best strategic land reserves for your company's new building. Firstly, by readily accepting the planning solution provided, and, secondly, by using a mode of construction that ensures optimal efficiency in the use of our land by building upwards. This building is a role model for how we see the ongoing development of the Bözingenfeld site. This is a landmark in urban building that has been created here at Bözingenfeld.

With the Biel/Bienne Campus of Bern University of Applied Sciences (BFH) and, as I already mentioned, the Swiss Innovation Park, Biel is working together with the canton of Berne and industry to create the necessary environment so that the specialists required in the future—including your specialists—are available. They are, in fact, our country's only "commodity". In future too, this context will enable you and other companies to adapt and develop products and processes so that they remain competitive on world markets.

Biel is seeing its population grow as well as its industry. Since 2000, economic restructuring and a trend towards "returning to the city" have meant that Biel now has more than 56'000 inhabitants, and the trend is continuing.

The City of Biel is committed to maintaining, or improving where possible, a great quality of life, even in a context of demographic growth. To reach this ambitious objective, a far-sighted land policy is essential. Its result is evident in Biel, as no other Swiss city has as many large land reserves in both central and peripheral locations. 25% of all undeveloped land in the municipality belongs to the City of Biel. The City buys land for public projects, such as schools, parks, roads, sporting facilities and other infrastructure. It also makes land or buildings available to meet the needs for housing and businesses, either through strategic sales or by allocating land with building rights.

Over time, this strategy has helped create top-quality residential areas and enabled the private sector to make major investments. As a result, a large number of attractive projects are in the planning or implementation stage and some have actually been completed. In this respect, the City of Biel is extremely well positioned.

Located at the heart of magnificent countryside, Biel attracts a wide variety of people who come and settle here every year. By investing for the long term and presenting an attractive basic package in terms of public service, the City stimulates private sector involvement and helps businesses to grow, offer new services and create jobs.

Ladies and gentlemen, Biel offers a very high quality of life to which development and renewal of the built environment have made a substantial contribution over the last few years. Biel has also been able to harmonize the old and new in the same urban context, something that was recognized in 2004 when the City received the "Wakker Prize." The City has large areas of flat land, which makes it ideal for cycling. This is good for health and the quality of life in general as it reduces air pollution.

To conclude, I would like to focus on the upcoming construction of the new campus of the Bern University of Applied Sciences, as this will make a huge contribution to the city by:

- Increasing our attractiveness as a venue for learning
- Strengthening our industrial base
- Helping to draw new talent
- Marking a milestone in terms of urban development—as the new campus also has merit from an architectural viewpoint.

I wish you continued success in Biel and worldwide!

Erich Fehr
Mayor of the City of Biel/Bienne