

KMC installing 600-ton sign of growth

Written by MARK JAEGER

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Port company has expanded facilities, workforce in past year

There is no denying that the 600-ton punch press recently installed at KMC Stampings in Port Washington is heavy-duty machinery.

But the hulking piece of tan-colored apparatus is also a tangible symbol of how well things are going at the longtime metal stamping and fabrication plant.

Chad Uebersetzig, KMC's vice president of operations, said the press — which cost about \$1.5 million — is expected to be brought on line next week.

“The punch press gives us added capabilities to meet the needs of customers for bigger jobs,” Uebersetzig said.

That responsiveness to market demands, in part, has allowed the company to survive and even thrive during the recent economic downturn.

“We faced the same kinds of challenges everyone else did in 2009, but we weathered the times by keeping our focus on quality and customer service,” Uebersetzig said.

“The feeling here is we can't control things like the economy, so we focus on what we can control and that has been a successful approach for us. We have been able to continue investing in our facilities here and grow our customer base.”

Although Port Washington was once a hotbed for manufacturing, those glory days have long passed with a series of plant closings.

Uebersetzig said that swing away from local production to out-of-state and even offshore sites is likely to swing the other direction eventually.

“It often comes down to a matter of cost — not just the per product cost, but the cost in terms of lesser quality and reduced customer service. Those are qualities that allow us to compete globally from right here in little old Port Washington,” he said.

Uebersetzig said the recession forced companies to realize they could no longer get by with business as usual.

“You have to be on your toes, looking for opportunities to capture new business and keep existing customers,” he said.

KMC, which is more formally known as Kickhaefer Manufacturing Co. and traces its roots to 1908, has been in serious growth mode, both in facilities and personnel.

Last year, the company built an 8,400-square-foot addition to its manufacturing plant on Park Street and acquired a 52,000-square-foot facility on Mineral Springs Drive to house its

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fabrication and welding operations.

It also operates a tool-making shop in Fredonia, and another manufacturing plant in Milwaukee's Walkers Point neighborhood, giving the company nearly 200,000 square feet of manufacturing space.

The company's growth can also be marked in human terms.

"We are at about 250 employees, up from 100 in 2010," Uebersetzig said.

Some of those employees have been with the company for as long as 40 years.

An increasing customer demand for fabricated components has resulted in an ongoing hiring push at the company.

"We are looking to fill professional positions such as engineers and technical positions like punch press operators and toolmakers," Uebersetzig said.

"I would say the response to these openings has been OK, but I wouldn't say people are lining up for the jobs. It can be difficult to find people for the technical positions."

The company trains entry level worker for more technical jobs, and has been an active participant in local job fairs that explain the types of positions that will need to be filled in the future.

"I am optimistic that this area will be able to support a strong manufacturing sector. The school systems here have been doing a good job preparing students for technical jobs, and there is a proven workforce," Uebersetzig said.

The company's flexible production capabilities allow it to handle short and long runs making parts ranging in size from a width of 26 inches to a thickness of 7 millimeters.

Production lines use a variety of punch presses, fourslide and vertical forming presses, and laser-cutting presses. MIG and TIG welding stations are also available, along with high-capacity vinyl dip lines.