

Tripling in size

Manufacturing, office expansions in homestretch at MB

By Mark Sherry

The fact that MB Companies Inc. in Chilton is expanding is hardly a secret in the area, but what might be less well known is the impressive scope of that expansion.

"It's a pretty significant change for us," said Doug Blada, CEO MB Airport Maintenance Products. "It's sorely needed."

MB Companies is tucked along lightly traveled MB Lane on Chilton's south side, and even from the road it is hard to get a good grasp on just how much the footprint of this manufacturer is growing. The aerial photo which accompanies this article gives a better indication of the growth represented by the 70,000 square foot manufacturing addition on the south side of the existing building, and the 16,500 square foot office phase on the west side. That is an increase of 86,500 square feet to the original building's 47,000 square feet—almost tripling its size.

Ground was broken last August on the project, and Blada said the plan is to have general contractor Keller Architects/Planners/Builders turn over the keys in May on the manufacturing phase and in July on the office phase.

In the works for years

Blada has been with MB Companies for about 8-1/2 years and said the expansion of the Chilton facility has been a long time in the making. The acquisition of MB Companies by Switzerland-based Aebi Schmidt Group several years ago helped the multi-million dollar expansion project happen. Planning on the project took about two years and took "a lot of hard work by a lot of people," Blada said.

Chilton will be the headquarters of Aebi Schmidt North America, and Blada also gave credit to City of Chilton officials for helping to make that happen. "Deciding where to do this didn't really take that long," he said.

Once the construction phases of this project wrap up in the coming months, there is still a lot of work ahead for MB Companies.

The planning process for the project included a significant amount of time and energy in laying out how the assembly process would work in the new facility. MB Companies builds virtually from ground up large snow removal/sweeper equipment used by airports around the world.

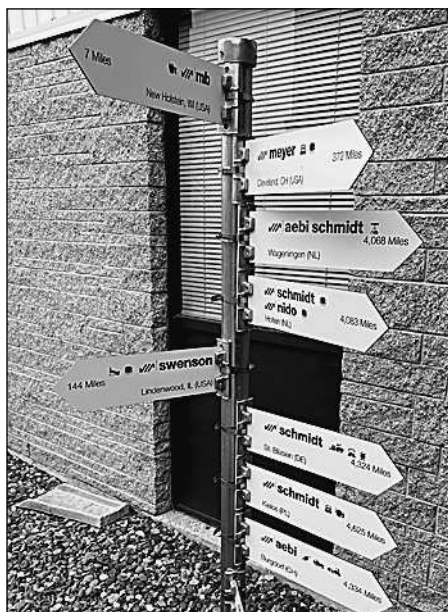
Production flow to change

Blada said production will be more flow centric at MB to accommodate modern manufacturing methods. That means the flow of raw materials to finished product at the Chilton facility will be flipped 180 degrees from what it has been. Steel will now come in through the north doors, fabricated in the existing portion of the factory, painted in the new paint facility which will be created inside the manufacturing addition, then make its way down two assembly lines in the new addition before going out the doors to customers.

All that will require MB to relocate its machining centers, basically flipping them end to end. "It's a tremendous amount of work," Blada said, but a process which will get under way just as soon as the manufacturing addition is finished.



Above is an overhead view of the expansion of MB Companies' Chilton facility. At left is a sign erected outside the Chilton entrance pointing the direction and distance to Aebi Schmidt Group's worldwide holdings. Below is progress on the new office area on the west side of the existing Chilton facility.



In addition, the new office expansion will allow the corporate functions presently housed in MB's New Holstein facility to move to Chilton. That will include the company's internet/technology, human resources, and finance employees—about 10 to 12 people. Blada emphasized that MB Companies will continue to employ around 27 people in New Holstein producing smaller attachments for skid steers, sidewalk brooms, and other multi-purpose equipment. He said New Holstein produces brooms up to 12 feet wide, while the equipment which comes out of Chilton has brooms between 14 and 22 feet wide.

The old Walmart property in Chilton also still will be used by MB as it produces wafer-type brushes which need to be replaced on equipment after their use life is over. MB also parks some of its finished equipment in the old Walmart parking lot, such as the three trucks which were there recently awaiting pickup by the U.S. military.

Looking for more employees

The Chilton facility employs about 130 hourly and salary employees and Blada said the expansion will necessitate the addition of at least 20 more in areas including engineering, finance, human resources, as well as skilled hourly workers. He said the functions done by MB employees are very technical and highly skilled in nature. "The fact that

we're looking for people is a positive," Blada said.

The expansion project in Chilton also will offer more functional and comfortable amenities for employees, including a cafeteria with expanded food offerings and employee lockers.

"We have the same challenges that every employer has," Blada said about attracting new employees. "We want to be a premier employer of the area. We build a highly technical and very exciting product." Having attractive wages and benefits and now a new, modern facility in which to work only helps attract those workers. "It's a game changer for us," Blada said.

The expanded facility might also help MB Companies add other products to its lines. In Europe, Aebi Schmidt is one of the leading producers of street sweepers which use some of the same technologies as MB's runway sweepers. If the day comes where MB needs even more space to produce more products, it has already designed where that expansion will take place. The roof pitch of the new manufacturing facility was even done in a way to already prepare for another possible addition in the future.

COVID challenges

All this growth and talk of potential growth comes as MB continues to navigate its way through what everyone hopes are the final days of a pandemic—

an event which impacted and continues to impact the company. Blada said there were times when more than 20 employees were out of action because of COVID-19, a significant percentage of the Chilton plant's workers. "It was a serious disruption," he said.

And then there were supply chain disruptions as well. Blada said MB's supply chain people did a "miraculous" job keeping enough supplies coming. Still, there was a time during the pandemic when Blada said "keeping our operation open due to the various challenges was very difficult, but the team here improvised and successfully completed a project for the military when our company was classified as essential and kept workers employed."

"I'm extremely proud of our team," Blada said. "We never shut the lights out in this facility."

Supply chain issues continue to be challenging, as the price of steel continues to escalate and the reduction in air travel of up to 90 to 95 percent continues its long climb back to more normal levels; however, Blada sees airline traffic ramping up and said he is optimistic about what the rest of this year holds. "We believe the economy will come back," he said and when it does, MB Companies Inc. will have a new facility in Chilton in which to contribute to that economy.