

Worthington Making Interior Upgrades

Mark Sherry, Tri-County News, 3/26/20

There is plenty of progress going on at Worthington Industries' manufacturing facility in Chilton, even if most of it is not noticeable from the outside of the building.

There are certainly signs of construction visible outside the facility at 300 E. Breed Street, but the vast majority is going on inside as Worthington is in the middle of a year-long interior renovation and also has greatly updated manufacturing equipment over the past year.

Gary Mayer, operations manager at the Chilton plant for the past three years, said the renovations are primarily for the comfort and betterment of employees. A locker room is being added, and rest rooms in the plant are being updated. Air conditioning is being added in those rest rooms. A gym for employee use also is being added following the lead of the corporate office in Columbus, Ohio, which also employs an on-site trainer. Roof updating is scheduled to start in April and other infrastructure updates are planned as well.

Year-long project

Mayer said the improvements have been in the discussion stage for about a year and a half. Work began in January and is expected to be completed next January. The additions will be welcome by Worthington's roughly 330 employees in Chilton, 280 of whom are hourly. Also very much welcomed in the shop in the past year was the addition of 17 new Computer Numerical Control (CNC) machines which replaced older machining equipment.

Also added in the past year, Mayer said, was an automation line to do cast body work for the nearly 1.5 million of Castbody torches which pass through the Chilton plant each year. The automation line reduced the number of workers in that area from 35 to 8, but Mayer said the displaced workers were transferred to different duties within the facility.

Qualified employees are much too valuable to be displaced these days. "It's been tough," Mayer said about finding workers, with much of Worthington's work force driving to Chilton daily from places such as Fond du Lac, Manitowoc, and Green Bay. Mayer said he would like to have 20 to 30 hour hourly workers right now, and then another 15 beyond that as Worthington incorporates the recent acquisition of a competitor into the Chilton plant.

MagTorch acquired

Worthington acquired Cleveland, Ohio-based MagTorch during 2019 and will retain that band name. Mayer said the company continues to work through which of MagTorch's products it will retain, with that work being based in Chilton and bringing about 18 more jobs to the community. Signing bonuses and increased wages are a couple measures Worthington has taken to attract and keep good employees.

Mayer said Worthington is an exceptional company for which to work, and he is a shining example of that. He began working for the company 15 years ago in the Maintenance Department and has elevated himself to a plant operations manager, demonstrating that the company offers opportunities to grow.

People do not just have to take Mayer's word for that, however, as Worthington has racked up the following honors over the years:

- In 2011, 2012, 2013, and 2014, Worthington Industries was named a Winning Company for its commitment to board diversity by 2020 Women on Boards, a national campaign to increase the number of women on corporate boards.
- It has been named one of the Most Admired Companies in the industry by Fortune magazine.
- In 2003, it was honored as one of the 30 best performing stocks of the past 30 years by Money magazine.
- Fortune magazine has listed Worthington as one of the 100 Best Companies to Work for in America four times.
- Forbes magazine named Worthington one of America's Best Big Companies in 2001 and 2004 and one of America's Best Managed Companies in 2005.
- In 2016-2018 it was named to Victory Media's Military Friendly® Employers.

Worthington operates from around 80 facilities worldwide, and everywhere it operates it tries to be a good corporate citizen. In Chilton, Worthington paid a portion of painting a City of Chilton water tower. With one of its facilities being a manufacturer of air tanks for firefighters, Worthington is working with the Chilton Fire Department to possibly assist the local department in the acquisition of new tanks. The local facility's service committee has also worked with the regional Make-A-Wish Foundation, and has made donations to parks in Calumet County.

Worthington can only do those things if it continues to crank out cylinders in an efficient manner, and that has not been a problem as of late. Mayer said in a "normal" year Worthington would produce 38 million cylinders at its Chilton plant, but in the past year that rose to 46 million with several major hurricanes and earthquakes in the world which increases consumer use of propane tanks. He said a warmer than usual winter this year has seen production return to more normal levels.

Worthington takes raw steel and turns it into a finished, propane-filled product in Chilton. That includes the familiar green tanks used for camping and cookouts, the larger blue utility tanks, cast body torches, plastic body torches, and brass torches. Mayer said Worthington also contributes in different ways to about 100 other different products.

Worthington products fill homeowner, manufacturing, culinary, and other "maker" needs for propane tanks and torches. "A lot of people use it every single day," Mayer said of propane and Worthington's products.

"Our product is DOT approved," Mayer added, pointing out that every tank is tested including with cameras which check seams and joints. One out of every 1,000 tanks is exploded on purpose to confirm stress capacities. On the torch side, everything is tested as well and Worthington is ISO certified.

Safety is a huge concern at Worthington, Mayer said, both with handling of propane and with activities related to constructing tanks and torches. Mayer said the company reported 28 injuries during its 2017 operational year but has that number down to seven over the past operational year. He added that Chilton firefighters visit the facility regularly to inspect operations.

Worthington has a huge share (about 97.5 percent) of the U.S. market for production of the green propane tanks, and around 90 percent of the market for the taller tanks. While foreign competition has increased somewhat, Worthington also sends a lot of tanks to Europe from its Chilton facility.

Mayer added that Worthington was founded in 1955 with a philosophy rooted in the Golden Rule – treat others as you wish to be treated – and that continues to be how Worthington relates to its customers, suppliers, shareholders, and employees.