

Brick plant fired up over contract

Gresham masonry factory reopens after shutdown

BY SHANNON WELLS

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A lucrative contract to supply building materials to a state project in Salem is giving a long-running brick plant in Gresham a new lease on life.

In what company officials hope is a harbinger of an economic uptick, the state of Oregon chose Mutual Materials of Bellevue, Wash., to supply bricks for a new 620-bed Oregon State Hospital in Salem.

The company's Columbia Clay Brick Manufacturing plant on Southeast Hogan Road is producing bricks for the building. A slump in the construction industry forced the plant's closure in October. Formerly known as Columbia Brickworks, the plant and its adjacent facilities along Johnson Creek employ up to 25 workers.



JIM CLARK / THE OUTLOOK
Jim Stokes, extrusion operator, watches as brick logs are formed at Columbia Clay Brick Manufacturing plant.

It was just weeks after the shutdown that Mutual Materials secured the contract, negotiated by Hoffman Construction of Portland, for the replacement hospital. Now the plant's equipment and giant kiln are up and running at full capacity, said company President Joe Bowen.

About half of the previously idled 15 employees have been called back to work. Others were transferred from other Mutual Materials sites, while the rest of the 25 workers were freshly hired.

Bowen is optimistic the project carries enough momentum to keep the plant going well beyond spring 2010, when the brick veneer for the new state hospital building should be completed.

"We have every belief that the location there is viable for us," he said of the Gresham plant. "It's very beneficial to us. We have every hope and expectation we will be manufacturing brick there for a long time to come."

He calls this project a "catalyst" to re-energize the facility, one of three brick plants Mutual Materials operates in the Pacific Northwest.

"The key benefit is it's a large enough project that it lets us restart the facility," he said. "Hopefully it will let us add other orders and put us in a position to (manufacture) some stock. This job was the catalyst or key thing we needed to restart."

Launched in 1906 as one of Gresham's earliest industries, Columbia Brickworks in its heyday made 9 to 10 million bricks a year and employed 45 to 50 workers. The family sold the business to an employee in 1973. After his death in the late 1980s, Mutual Materials took over the plant.

Founded in 1900, Mutual Materials employs about 550 full-time employees at facilities in the Northwest and British Columbia, Canada. In addition to the brick plant, Mutual operates concrete pavers and retaining wall slab plants at the 80-acre, clay-rich Hogan Road site.

Bowen said the global recession made a significant negative impact on the Northwest's construction industry.

"Economically, it's one of the most difficult environments I've been through, and the company's been through, in 15 to 20 years or so," he said.

Although last fall marks the second time the Columbia brick plant was shut down this year, Bowen emphasizes how rare an occasion it is. Brick kilns, he noted, just aren't designed for start-and-stop

operation.

“You have a very large kiln you have to heat continuously,” he said. “When you shut down and start up, there’s a significant process to do that right. It’s best to run those plants continuously.”

According to the Oregon Department of Human Services, the agency that runs the hospital, the project is scheduled for completion in late 2011.

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