New plant on cutting edge
Pritchard MetalFab uses latest technology, boasts efficient layout

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By Murray McNeill

A new sheet metal plant, hailed as the kind of lean manufacturing operation Manitoba needs to compete globally, officially opened yesterday in Winnipeg.

The 40,000-square-foot Pritchard MetalFab plant on Lowson Crescent not only boasts the latest in manufacturing equipment and technologies, but also a layout that makes maximum use of space and streamlines the process.

Boost productivity

Gordon Greaves, chief executive officer of MetalFab's parent company, The Pritchard Group, said the layout and equipment have enabled MetalFab to boost productivity about 20 per cent after just over a month in the new facility.

He told guests at yesterday's opening that with the rapid rise in the Canadian dollar's value -- it's worth nearly 25 US cents more than four years ago -- Manitoba manufacturers need to increase productivity. They must make up for reduced profit on U.S. sales and keep pace in a competitive global market, he said. "We need to learn to work not only harder, but smarter," Greaves added, and the new Lowson Crescent plant will enable Pritchard MetalFab to do so.

Manitoba Industry, Economic Development and Mines Minister Jim Rondeau, who was at yesterday's official opening, said Pritchard MetalFab is a Manitoba success story.

"They have established themselves as a national leader in manufacturing by identifying niche markets where world-class capability exists and strategically building upon those strengths," Rondeau said.

Greaves said Pritchard MetalFab spent about $1.2 million on new equipment for the plant, including nearly $1 million on a state-of-the-art laser cutting machine that carves machine parts out of plate steel.

"The new technology in this one allows us to do it faster and more accurately," he said.

"It also eliminates a lot of the drudgery of the parts (fabrication) business -- the grinding and machining work that had to be done before," he said. That frees workers to perform other tasks.

Greaves said the company had about 50 employees when it moved into the new facility on Jan. 1, and has hired six or seven more workers since, including three welders, a shipper and two general labourers.
He noted the Advanced Manufacturing Initiative (AMI) provided the company with two outside consultants who were instrumental in helping develop the new plant's layout.

AMI is a joint initiative of the Manitoba division of the Canadian Manufacturers and Exporters and the federal and provincial governments. The three-year, $4-million program launched last February after an Industry Canada study showed Manitoba had one of the least productive manufacturing sectors in the country.

AMI's goal is to encourage the province's more than 2,000 manufacturing firms to adopt the kind of lean concepts and systems that have worked so well for Japanese giants such as Toyota, Honda and Mitsubishi.

Roy Cook, chairman of the Manitoba division of the CME, and Tony van Rosmalen, the division's vice-president and general manager, said Pritchard MetalFab is a perfect example of the kind of lean operation the AMI is trying to promote.

"Better, faster, cheaper -- that's the way the customer wants it," van Rosmalen said. "We're also competing with low-cost manufacturers in China and India, and that's why we have to become more productive."

Rondeau used yesterday's opening to officially proclaim Feb. 12 to 18 as Manufacturing Week in Manitoba.

He said manufacturing accounts for 12 per cent of the province's gross domestic product and more than 68,000 jobs. Between 1995 and 2004, the value of manufacturing shipments in the province has grown from $8.2 billion to $12.5 billion per year.

Manufacturing Week activities will include a one-day manufacturing trade summit in Winnipeg on Feb. 16 and a gala awards dinner that night to honour this year's recipient of the Manitoba Export Award -- Steinbach door and window maker Loewen -- and the first 10 inductees into the new Manitoba Manufacturers' Hall of Fame.

murray.mcneill@freepress.mb.ca