

Keeping business local

Aurora Specialty Textiles Group invests in American manufacturing.

BY JEFF MORAVEC



In July, Aurora kicked off its celebration of American manufacturing by hosting a picnic for employees and local officials. Photo: Aurora Specialty Textiles Group.

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When it became obvious to Aurora Specialty Textiles Group (ASTG) that its 132-year-old facility in Aurora, Ill., was no longer adequate, it wouldn't have been surprising if the company had given serious consideration to moving operations overseas.

But that was not the case.

"There might have been a split-second mention of Mexico, but only because somebody brought it up in a brainstorming session," says Dan LaTurno, president of ASTG, which coats, dyes and finishes both woven and nonwoven fabrics. "Moving things overseas was never seriously considered, mainly because our greatest resource is really our employees. The workforce was too valuable to us—we would have lost too much."

Instead, ASTG, a subsidiary of the Milwaukee-based Meridian Industries Inc., moved its manufacturing operation in 2015 to a new 124,000-square-foot facility just 12 miles away, in Yorkville, Ill.

The move, LaTurno said at the time, was necessary to realize the company's commitment to becoming a global leader in wide-width coating and finishing. But it was also evidence of Aurora's commitment to maintaining its operations in Illinois, where it has been located since 1883.

That theme was evident in early July when the company hosted an old-fashioned lawn party at its plant—replete with traditional American picnic foods—to kick off an effort to highlight the benefits of the investment in its new facility and its employees.

"What we really wanted to do was celebrate U.S. manufacturing," LaTurno says. "We have a very deep commitment to keeping jobs in America, and doing the right thing as far as the community is concerned.

We wanted to stay in the community, not pull the rug out from under the local economy."

The state-of-the-art facility, which employs more than 70 people, enhances ASTG's ability to serve its customers, LaTurno says. The plant features the company's new EHWHA ultra-wide-width coating and finishing line, which works with a range of woven and nonwoven fabrics up to 134 inches wide.

"We're never going to beat Chinese manufacturers on price, but we can do things China can't," LaTurno explains. "For example, ASTG can meet orders quickly and in small or large customized batches. This potentially saves money for our customers by reducing extensive, and expensive, wait times for materials purchased overseas."

In addition, according to ASTG vice president Marcia Ayala, an in-house research and development staff allows for improved product customization. "Customizing products for our customers is one of our strengths, and you're not going to get that from overseas manufacturers," she says.

In coming months, ASTG will be highlighting components of the new operation, including hosting a visit by an area manufacturing trade group, the Valley Industrial Association, to show off the facility's focus on sustainability.

ASTG employees were grateful for the July picnic and other company events to thank them for their hard work, LaTurno says. But they also show their thanks for the company's decision to remain in Illinois. "When Bruce Pindyck, the owner of Meridian, walks through here, there's just a parade of people coming to shake his hand," LaTurno says. "They're very appreciative that ASTG stayed put." ☺

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