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Big Business: Gonzales Manufacturing looms large on horizon

Prices for steel in the country are still rising, but that hasn't stopped a Gonzales company from taking advantage of another market trend to add many new jobs to the local economy.

Gonzales Manufacturing Company, a subsidiary of Cleaver-Brooks, has added 20 new jobs to its steel fabrication operation since January and plans to add 20 more new faces to its plant makeup as soon as it can train the workers to jump in and help the company continue to meet market demands.

The market trend spurring the local business on is the decision by many power generators around the state to begin building new coal-powered electricity generating plants across the state of Texas.

With that new construction trend, GMC has won its fair share of contracts for coal silos, stacks and generator housings for current projects and General Manager Julius Tobola thinks that trend will continue for at least a year.

"We are hearing that some other companies are putting plans for new generating plants on schedule and we think we have a good chance of getting those contracts since we are centrally located to most of them," he said. "That means that freight prices will be cheaper for them because of our location."

One of the bigger projects the company is currently working on is a coal silo project for San Antonio's Calaveras expansion project.

Roy Maldonado, manufacturing manager for the plant, said that the completed project will include one million pounds of steel being fabricated by GMC and shipped to Calaveras.

The project began in February and should be completed by mid-year and will add another 15,000 hours to the work backlog.

Shipping began this week on the project.

To help meet the growing need of skilled workers, Maldonado says the company has teamed with The Victoria College to institute a welding training program completely housed at GMC.

"We recently graduated eight welders from the most recent class," Maldonado said. "We immediately hire all eight of them and gave them jobs with us."

"We will be starting another class of eight students on April 10 and will most likely be able to offer all of them jobs at the end too."

Maldonado said none of the welding students are under any obligation to come to work for GMC and can instead gain employment from any other welding business, but the need for welders locally seems to be the most acute at GMC.

"One of the most important aspects of our continued growth here in Gonzales will be the availability of a trained workforce," Maldonado said. "Victoria College is giving us the ability to do just that and we really appreciate their help in the education of the workers."

GMC currently employs 80 workers making it one of the larger employers in the city and Tobola hopes to continue to add to that number.

"With the coal-fired plants becoming more and more popular," he said, "we should be able to continue to compete for and win

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bids on those projects.

"Right now we are booked solid for a whole year and that is the first time that has happened in a long time."

The affordable price of coal compared to natural gas has fueled the push for the new plants, he said.

"But, as more and more coal-fired plants come on line," Tobola said, "the price of coal will inch further and further up and that might make natural gas plants more attractive again."

In the meantime, the cost of steel always makes a big difference for GMC when it comes to the profit margin.

"We have to continue to buy the steel no matter what the cost is," he said. "The worst case scenario would be that we can't get the steel because of boycotts and such. We have to keep our fingers crossed that this will not happen."

While steel is still being delivered by rail and highway, GMC will continue to fabricate the many steel products it specializes in and the local job market will reap the benefits.

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