

New digs for mining company

BY CASSANDRA KYLE, THE STARPHOENIX DECEMBER 4, 2009



Gordon Graham, project director for potash development with BHP Billiton, and office administrator Tammy Mowles are preparing to move into the new Discovery Plaza on Third Avenue

Photograph by: Richard Marjan, The StarPhoenix, The StarPhoenix

The world's largest mining company will soon have a presence in downtown Saskatoon.

BHP Billiton, which is working to advance its Jansen potash project east of the city, will move from its Innovation Place office into the newly constructed Discovery Plaza building on Third Avenue early in the new year, said Gordon Graham, the company's project director for potash development.

"We needed more office space, clear and simple," Graham said in an interview Thursday.

The move comes a little over a year after the company first came to the city to focus on advancing its prospective potash reserves. In July 2008, the company completed its acquisition of Anglo Potash Ltd., which had amassed nearly 1.8 million acres of potash permits in the province.

Graham said the move downtown, which he anticipates will take place at the end of January, will give the growing company room to stretch its legs in a LEED-certified building. The company will take up all of the third floor and also has the option for space on the fourth floor.

"The nice thing about it is they're actually going to brand the building as well," Graham said. "It will be called Discovery Plaza but it will actually have our branding on the top of the building and on a couple of the sides as well."

While BHP Billiton's logo has yet to be erected over Third Avenue, the company is pushing forward with a branding and marketing campaign designed to let residents of Saskatoon and Saskatchewan know the company is here and ready to become a key part of the community.

Namely, said Graham, BHP Billiton has taken a leading sponsorship role in the upcoming world junior hockey championship, and is presenting the Family Hockey Fest set for Saskatoon Dec. 17 to 22 and Regina Dec. 26 to 31.

"We've taken a very large sponsorship position in the world junior hockey tournament, which we think is a good opportunity for us to continue to communicate our brand and our presence here in Saskatchewan," Graham said.

The company has tied its tournament sponsorship in with the charitable projects it is involved with. BHP Billiton has donated 1,000 tickets to the hockey games to local schools, youth groups and other organizations including the provincial Breakfast for Learning program facilitated by the Saskatchewan Nutrition Advisory Council for Kids (SNACK).

The timing of the tournament couldn't have been better for the company, Graham explained. If the event was held last year or was set for next year, BHP Billiton likely wouldn't have been able to make the relationship work.

"This was just an absolutely perfect opportunity to take advantage of a very Saskatchewan-centric type of event," he said. "Things like this don't come to a place like Saskatoon very often and it was just the perfect opportunity for us to start giving back a bit."

The company plans to continue to support the communities it operates in as it moves forward on its Jansen project. Graham said the mining giant plans to advance the project as well as the nearby Boulder and Young projects in 2010.

"We really view potash as a potential great new business for the broader organization and we're really hoping the projects we have here in Saskatchewan really form the cornerstone of that," he said.

Indeed, said Graham, the headquarters of the BHP Billiton division the Saskatoon office is part of -- diamonds and specialty products -- recently moved to Vancouver from London, England. The move, in part, was made to be closer to the potential potash development in Saskatchewan, he said.

The company's only operating Canadian asset is the Ekati diamond mine in the Northwest Territories.

While BHP Billiton's work in Saskatchewan is focused on potash, planting roots in the community is part of the job Graham said the company is happy to participate in.

"Hopefully we can look forward to decades and decades more of it," he said.

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