

Maple Leaf beefs up with facility

Finding local workers one of biggest challenges for new distribution centre

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Wide refrigerators can hold a lot of food for a hungry family, but when you're feeding communities in five provinces and all three territories, a new Frigidaire just won't do.

Something along the lines of a custom-built 93,000-square-foot cooler with an attached 48,000-square-foot freezer, however, might be enough to handle the job. That's what Maple Leaf Consumer Foods is banking on with its new distribution centre on 18.6 acres of land in Saskatoon's Marquis Industrial zone.

"This facility, we've actually re-named it the Midwest Distribution Centre," said Mike Conrad, distribution manager at the site. "The name speaks for itself because it's the middle of where we have to go to. We can service Northern Ontario, B.C. and the North, and guess what, Saskatoon is almost dead centre."

The newest resident on 64th Street started operating out of the \$33-million facility on April 28 and is slowly expanding its staff of 54 to 110 warehouse and office workers by July. About 45 of the centre's current employees came from Mitchell's Gourmet Foods on 11th Street, which is set to close by the end of the year, Conrad said.

Inside the 163,000-square-foot building, only about 4,000 pallets are stocked with processed meats, bacon and ham -- all of which come from the two city Mitchell's plants on 11th Street and McLeod Street. Once operations begin to increase and the distribution centre starts to accept shipments from Schneider's plants in June and Maple Leaf plants by August, most of the warehouse's 17,500 pallets will be filled with boxes full of product from across Canada.

With contractors still working on the finishing touches at the centre, Conrad senses changes taking place within employees as well. Workers were nervous for the first few days of operations and already, he said, they're starting to become more comfortable with new equipment and new order processing methods.

"Last Monday everybody wanted to quit. This week everything is coming along and making a lot of sense," he said.

But employees, or rather a lack of them, have created the largest hurdle for Maple Leaf management to overcome, Conrad explained. The facility can't move into full operations without a complete roster of employees, and finding men and women to fill the positions is no easy task in the current economy.

"It's a skilled job now, like a plumber or a electrician, it's not just a pat job anymore, you have to use your brains," Conrad said. "Back in the '70s when I started this job anybody could pick an order, you grab a box and go . . . but the systems are changing so it's more than just grabbing a box, (it's) how do you work this piece of equipment?"



CREDIT: Gord Waldner, The StarPhoenix
The Maple Leaf Consumer Foods Distribution Center in Saskatoon, which opened April 28, occupies a 163,000-square-foot building

The company believes a combination of pay and perks will attract and retain workers, he said, and Maple Leaf has invested in items such as flat-screen TVs, picnic tables, a barbecue and free coffee and lunches at the new Saskatoon distribution centre to keep workers happy.

Considering Maple Leaf in 2005 scrapped plans for a \$110-million pork processing plant for Saskatoon and considering today's troubled pork industry, the city should feel lucky the distribution centre was built at all, said Kent Smith-Windsor, executive director of the Saskatoon and District Chamber of Commerce.

"I don't want to say it's a second prize, but I think we have to regard ourselves as being pretty fortunate that they made the commitment at the time that they did as compared to making a delay in that decision, because it's quite likely that the project would have been cancelled or been put on the back burner, so we have to be happy with what's in place," Smith-Windsor said.

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