

06/28/2007

## Tour highlights state's ability to help manufacturers

By: Bill Doak



*Dur-A-Flex employee Corey Crawford, left, talks with Lt. Governor Mike Fedele Tuesday.*

**There's something about being a lieutenant governor that makes touring the state's cities and towns a bit of an adventure. Other than the local politicians, few really know who he is or what he does.**

But Lt. Governor Mike Fedele's visit to the East Hartford Dur-A-Flex, Inc. plant on Goodwin Street proved to be a pleasant introduction to a local success story designed to highlight the advantages of doing business with the state's small business advocates.

Dur-A-Flex, Inc. president Bob Smith showed off the 66-employee plant at 85 Goodwin Street to Fedele and State Senator Gary LeBeau and Mayor Melody Currey, giving a first-hand look at how the right kind of state help can make a big difference in operating efficiency. Smith gave a Powerpoint presentation tracing his company's humble roots as a Franklin Avenue storefront floor refinisher to one of the largest manufacturer's of durable, long-lasting floor coating companies in the nation. Smith said his company, which expanded several times until moving to its present location from Park Avenue in 1992 to an expanding 56,000-square foot operation.

Smith credited the ability of his workers to think for themselves, come up with innovative ideas and help the company grow new product lines with Dur-A-Flex's success. Since its founding in 1966 by Mitchell and Betty Andreski using epoxy to remodel kitchen countertops, make shower stalls and waterproof basements, Dur-A-Flex, Inc. expanded into manufacturing its own commercial and industrial floorings. Since 1991, its

workforce increased from 20 to more than 60 employees, otherwise known as co-owners. In addition, Dur-A-flex expanded from a 15,000 square foot facility to today's 140,000 square foot facility and increased sales more than 500 percent.

"If you've been to Disney World or Fenway Park, chances are you walked and stood on our Dur-A-Flex floor," Smith said. As one might expect, floors in the spacious East Hartford plant show off the company's forte. And yes, aside from a little bit of fine sand here and there, you could eat off them.

One of the biggest problems Smith said his company faces is getting that sand - the main raw material in the epoxy floor coatings it makes - shipped to East Hartford. Dur-A-Flex laid out a rail spur to the east side of its building to handle deliveries of millions of pounds of sand and resins it needs to mix all the various floor covering combinations and colors for customers. But had to give up relying on rail and switched to truck delivery after getting reliable, on-time shipments by rail became all but impossible.

"The death of rail in this country is unbelievable. We can't get any rail cars unless we end up buying our own. It's one of the saddest stories in America," states company owner Smith. So, instead of one rail car carrying the equivalent of three trailer loads of sand, he is forced to truck his raw materials to East Hartford to meet the "on time" lean manufacturing philosophy. "That's thousands of tractor trailers coming up the highway from Illinois, but we have no other alternative. If a train happens to deliver our products in 4 weeks or six weeks, that's great. But we can't rely on it."

Lt. Governor Mike Fedele, Connecticut's Business Advocate Rob Simmons, Mayor Currey and Sen. LeBeau listened in rapt attention. Bonnie Del Conte, president of CONNSTEP, which helped Dur-A-Flex implement the lean program was justifiably proud of the local company's success story. It is something many more companies should emulate, said Elliot Ginsberg, director of the East Hartford Connecticut Center for Advanced Technology.

After utilizing CONNSTEP's lean services, Dur-A-Flex reduced inventory in the area of the plant it calls its "supermarket" and has seen sales and employee culture soar within the plant. The company decreased utility costs by \$12,000 and increased sales 40 percent. Training continues in an ongoing process of reading and studying said Bill Greider, one of the plants managers, in the Continuous Improvement Champion Certificate (CICC) program, a 10-week certification course that provides intensive exposure to the principles and practices needed to develop and sustain Lean Enterprise. Greider said the employees are also reading the Toyota Way, the fourth

book they have been assigned.

"Small business are the economic engine that drives Connecticut," Fedele told the workers assembled in the attractive lounge of the company. "What you have here is a jewel of a small business. We have the technology to help you grow."

State Senator LeBeau was impressed with the educational skills the workers brought with them and picked up through the continuous training process.

"Manufacturing is essential to the state of Connecticut," said LeBeau. "Your competition is in China, Mexico, Thailand and Europe. And you are doing a great job."

Mayor Melody Currey also praised the workers as well as former congressman Rob Simmons for his work with the small business community.

Later Lt. Gov. Fedele and others who toured the plant mingled and chatted with workers, among them East Hartford's Corey Crawford, a 7-year employee 'partner' of Dur-A-Flex. The father of three kids ages 7, 5 and 4, Crawford is astounded by how smart they are.

"This is a great company to work for. The best job I ever had. They trust us to work, and we train the new workers how it is done," said Crawford. "We also cross-train into every other job in the company - except the president's," he laughed.



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