

Valbruna Slater expanding test lab

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Steeled for future

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Sherry Slater | The Journal Gazette

FORT WAYNE – Valbruna Slater Stainless Inc. is investing \$1.5 million in an expansion that will quadruple the size of its local testing lab and reaffirm its commitment to the community, company officials said.

Construction of the two-story, 16,000-square-foot building at 2400 Taylor St. is scheduled to be complete by the end of the year.

“What we really need to do as a company is to make a great product and deliver it on time. This project is going to help us do that,” CEO Paul From said.

The steelmaker also plans to invest in new testing equipment but won’t give details.

From said competitive concerns keep him from revealing how much Valbruna Slater, subsidiary of an Italian company, plans to spend. Even the price tag might give rivals a clue as to what technology the company is buying, he said.

What’s not secret is how important it is for the company to test and confirm the strength of its metal bars. The next time you’re at 40,000 feet, you’ll feel better knowing metal in the fuselage was subjected to rigorous testing.

Valbruna Slater sells steel bars – measuring 2 inches to 8 inches in diameter and 12 feet to 24 feet in length – to aerospace, energy and other customers. Testing ensures the metal, which weighs up to 200 pounds a foot, will react predictably at various temperatures and altitudes.

The metal is tested after heat treating, which can make it stronger or weaker, depending on the composition, said Randy Kline, Valbruna Slater’s quality manager. Testing methods are determined by the customer and trade-group guidelines, he said.

Century of steel

The Taylor Street operation was born on the ruins of another company.

Valbruna Slater bought the assets of a bankrupt Slater Steel Inc. for \$6.4 million in 2004. The local plant employed about 370 when the former owner went out of business.

The business came with environmental baggage. Slater Steel had been cleaning up soil and groundwater contamination at the site for several years. The new owner had to agree to continue the cleanup, setting

aside \$500,000 to deal with problems identified by the Indiana Department of Environmental Management.

Fort Wayne officials offset that expense by offering Valbruna Slater \$500,000 in economic incentives, including tax abatements.

A steel foundry was first opened at the site in the 1890s, From said, adding that the property saw about 1,500 workers daily at its height.

But Valbruna Slater never planned to replicate a sprawling operation. The company created a leaner operation that makes bars by melting metal ingot – or feed stock – from Italy. The metal bars leave the property in tractor-trailer rigs.

The company added two remelting furnaces and three heat-treating furnaces in a \$19.25 million expansion project started in 2006 and completed last year. The added building still has room for four more furnaces.

Valbruna Slater tries to buy as many products as possible from companies in the community, From said. That includes Fort Wayne-based Steel Dynamics Inc., which sells carbon-steel bars used to ready Valbruna Slater's rolling mill for stainless production.

Valbruna Slater operates seven distribution facilities in the U.S., not counting Fort Wayne.