

Stevensville firm eyes defunct Bonner mill

by JENNIFER McKEE - Ravalli Republic

HELENA - A Stevensville pipefitting company wants to vastly expand its business at the old Stimson mill site in Bonner, creating just under 400 jobs.

Neil Sheldon, president of Poly Warehouse, Inc., of Stevensville, hopes to partner with Crown Machine, Inc., of Addison, Ill., to manufacture a special kind of plastic pipe and pit liner at the site.

"Our goal is putting Americans back to work," Sheldon said at a meeting here Wednesday with Gov. Brian Schweitzer.

Sheldon and George Holmes, general manager of Crown, met with the governor to discuss their plans. They said they were drawn to the Stimson site because it has easy access to rail lines and Interstate 90 to ship in raw materials and ship out their products.

Holmes said in an interview with Lee Newspapers later that the site has the enormous buildings necessary for manufacturing, sufficient electricity and a large concrete pad for storage.

"It's a pretty nice facility," he said.

Sheldon and Holmes told Schweitzer they hope to manufacture a special kind of plastic pipe that is becoming the industry standard for municipal water mains and other large water moving projects. Sheldon said the plastic, called polyethylene, can freeze solid without bursting and allows for no leaks, saving millions of gallons of drinking water currently leaking out of water lines across the country.

The pipes and other plastic components would be entirely American-made, Sheldon said. Polyethylene would be shipped to the plant as tiny beads made by refineries in the American gulf coast. Poly would then melt and mold it into pipes of all sizes.

"I'm very confident," Sheldon said after the meeting. He estimated the new manufacturing plant would directly employ 380 people and create about 100 new, "indirect" jobs.

Holmes told the governor that there's an obvious market for polyethylene water pipe. America's drinking water infrastructure is in bad need of repair.

"There is an immense need" for new water pipe, he said.

And polyethylene is better than older, PVC pipes, which are no longer used in Europe and becoming less common in the United States. Additionally, working with polyethylene has little environmental concerns.

"There is no effluent," he said. "It's absolutely inert."

"I think it's exciting," Schweitzer said after the meeting. He said the pipe has enormous application in Montana for everything from irrigation to golf courses, to say nothing of the jobs it will create.

Poly Warehouse contacted Crown about a year ago, Holmes said. Currently, Poly makes fittings for polyethylene pipes, but could drastically reduce some of its costs if it made the pipes itself.

Holmes told Lee Newspapers he's been to Montana six times working on the deal. He said Crown would retain its business in Illinois, while investing in a new company with Poly.

Dick King, president and chief executive officer of the Missoula Area Economic Development Corp., said Poly's existing operation in Stevensville would not change if the expansion goes through. If anything, he said, it may grow.

King called the idea "tentative," but hopeful.

Sheldon said the two companies needed to iron things out, but he sounded confident.

"There's a lot of work to do, but we can do it," he said.

Stimson once ran its plywood mill in Bonner day and night, employing around 1,200 people. The mill closed earlier this year and most of the equipment was sold at auction.