

MBI workers and community work together to find jobs

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It is the official opening people wish wasn't necessary, but are glad to have it when it is needed.

On Tuesday, the MBI Employees Action Centre invited all of its partners, the media, volunteers and local politicians to its site at the Knights of Columbus Hall on Ellis Avenue, as a way of recognizing their support and the centre's operation.

Pembroke Mayor Ed Jacyno, MPP John Yakabuski and MP Cheryl Gallant were on hand during the event, which also served to honour how all levels of government came together to try and help workers who lost their jobs following the closure of Smurfit-MBI.

Mayor Jacyno said it is his and the city's intention to put industry back in the plant and get people working again.

He said it is wonderful how the community pulled together to confront this crisis.

MP Gallant said it is very encouraging how government representatives, community partners and the public as a whole have pulled together to help.

MPP Yakabuski said it is important to remember this isn't about jobs, it is about the people and how they are affected by this situation. He said he is confident that in time good will come out of this event.

"At the end of the day, Pembroke will rise from this setback looking as strong as always," he said.

Now in its second month of operation, the MBI Employees Action Centre has been the hub of activity, as volunteers and staff try to help the 139 workers displaced by the closure of the Smurfit-MBI plant in June.

A collective effort, the centre is funded by the Ontario Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities, the Government of Canada and Smurfit-MBI, while partners in its operation include the Rural Outreach Centre, Employment Assistance Service of Petawawa and Algonquin College.

It is run primarily by volunteers, members of the plant's labour adjustment committee, who have been putting in many hours to help their fellow employees.

Current members include Dave Buske, committee chairman, Shawn Buske, Sean Robinson, Natasha Laramee, Melissa Byers, Mike Cochrane and Jeff Halliday.

So far, 26 employees have found other positions through the centre and another 12 have opted for retirement.

Bonnie Schryer, the centre's co-ordinator, said it isn't just about finding jobs. She said workers who find themselves out of employment after so many years of working have a lot of soul searching to do before deciding what to do next with their lives. The centre's task is to help them in this quest.

"Some want jobs right away, others want to retrain, or go back to school," Ms. Schryer said, while others may decide to take early retirement, if they are able.

Mr. Buske said it has been a difficult adjustment for all involved, explaining the plant was more like a family, with generations of people spending a better part of their lives working together there. He himself started there when he was 17 and worked his way through the factory.

"This has been the worst thing which has ever happened to us," he said, but he, like the committee, wants to help co-workers move on with their lives.

Mr. Buske said the centre has remained very important, as many long-term employees are not used to the changes in the unemployment system. Others are embarrassed by the situation.

"We're here only to direct them," he said, to the resources and programs they may be seeking, employment and training opportunities which may be available, or to be a place to stay in touch with peers and support one another.

Action centres usually keep operating up to a year from when they first open.

The centre is located in the Knights of Columbus Hall at 170 Ellis Ave. It's open from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. Tuesdays and Wednesdays. Call 613-732-9981 for more information.



CUTTING THE CAKE - The MBI Employees Action Centre, which is helping 139 workers put out of work after the closing of Smurfit-MBI, marked its grand opening on Tuesday. Taking part in the cake cutting were (front row left to right) Pembroke Mayor Ed Jacyno, Renfrew-Nipissing-Pembroke MPP John Yakabuski, committee member Jeff Halliday and Paul Delaat, representing the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities. (Observer photo)