

# Commonwealth closing veneer operation

## 100 people out of work

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Staff Writer

Commonwealth Plywood Company Limited announced it is closing its Pembroke veneer operation indefinitely as of March 9.

The operation is a victim of the tough hardwood veneer market.

The move will put more than 100 full-time employees out of work.

The 40 people in the milling and plywood sections will continue to work.

In a statement released to the media Monday, company president W.T. Caine expressed his regret in making the announcement.

"The closing of the veneer operation comes as a disappointment to the management and owners," he said, "however, it cannot be avoided at this time."

"Extremely tough market conditions, brought on by a strong Canadian dollar, diminishing market capacity and offshore competition, prevents us from selling our products above the cost of production."

"These factors, coupled with a deteriorating log supply and a lack of competitiveness in the Pembroke operation, have brought about the closure."

David Weisenberg, plant chairman of United Steelworkers Sub Local 1-1000, said Monday's announcement was sudden, but wasn't really unexpected.

"We just learned this at 8 a.m. today," he said. "We just got back after a small layoff over the Christmas holidays and now we learn about this indefinite one coming."

"I don't think it has really hit home with the employees yet."

Mr. Weisenberg said workers were aware the Pembroke operation has a high inventory stored in

warehouses and low sales, so it was a matter of time before something happened. He said they do have until March before the layoffs come into effect, so there is still hope the market might improve before then.

"We're playing a waiting game" to see if these layoffs go forward as announced.

This blow is being felt keenly in the city, which is still reeling from the fallout of losing Smurfit MBI last year. When the corrugated container plant closed down for good by the summer, nearly 140 jobs were lost.

Pembroke Mayor Ed Jacyno, MP Cheryl Gallant and MPP John Yakabuski were all briefed Monday morning by Commonwealth officials about the planned shutdown.

All three vowed to do what they can to help workers displaced by the impending plant closure.

"I want to assure the workers and their families that I will do everything possible to help them through this difficult time," MP Gallant said.

"My office has been in contact with officials in Ottawa to brief us as to what is available to assist Commonwealth Plywood Company. I have also invited company representatives to my office to let them know that I will leave no stone unturned to help the laid-off employees."

"I ask employees to give me the time and opportunity to see what can be done on their behalf," she said.

MPP Yakabuski said the provincial government has a major role to play when it comes to forestry and the future viability

of the forestry industry.

He said he has written to Natural Resources Minister David Ramsay to once again stress more has to be done to bolster the forest industry.

He added his office stands ready to help workers and their families.

"On Jan. 1, the province assumed complete responsibility for the design and delivery of programs and measures that are to support workers, including employment assistance services, skills development and labour market partnerships," MPP Yakabuski said. "I am ready to assist the laid-off employees."

"As Mayor of Pembroke, I am pleased to work with my federal and provincial colleagues to deal with this setback," Mayor Jacyno said.

"This potential loss of jobs will not only impact our community but our neighbours as well, since many employees reside in the Township of Laurentian Valley, the Town of Petawawa and beyond."

The mayor said the announced shut down is a symptom of the ongoing crisis in the forestry sector in Ontario.

The one thread of hope local officials are hanging on to is Commonwealth Plywood isn't ruling out reopening the plant in the future, if economic conditions improve.

"I'm truly optimistic there may be options with this company to salvage this plant," Mayor Jacyno said, but only if things turn around. He added he hopes the federal and provincial governments will do more to defend and promote Canada's forest industry.

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