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Big blocks: Hot wire cutters slice through expanded polystyrene foam blocks in the Harbor Foam, Inc. manufacturing facility in Grandville. In addition to serving the construction and packaging industries, the company is trying its hand in movies and ArtPrize.

FOAM AND FORTUNE

GRANDVILLE COMPANY DABBLES IN ARTPRIZE, MOVIES

BY MATT VANDE BUNTE
THE GRAND RAPIDS PRESS

GRANDVILLE — Coming out of a block mold, huge chunks of expanded polystyrene all look pretty much the same as they stand 16 feet tall around Harbor Foam Inc.

But after the material passes through a series of cutters, the finished products near the Grandville plant's shipping bays look very different.

"There's a roof that's gonna go out, some (automotive) ramps; there's some hot tub covers over there," Ryan Van Dyke said. "We're very diversified."

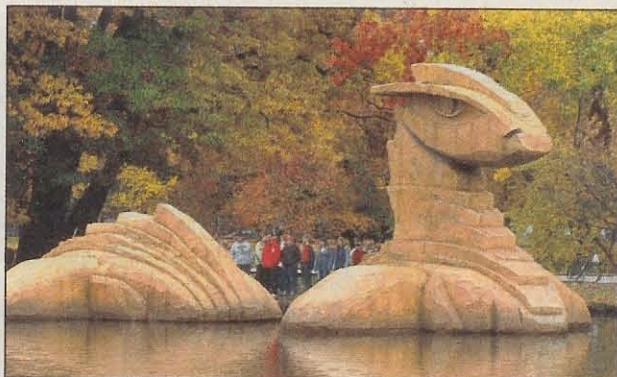
Last year, the company produced the foam shapes for "Nessie on the Grand," one of the most popular entries in the Grand Rapids ArtPrize competition.

New projects

And, three years after Van Dyke started the company with his mother, Pat, and sister, Laura Kuperus, Harbor Foam is expanding. The operation received a 12-year, 50-percent tax break from the city this month on \$113,000 in equipment, including two foam-processing machines and a down cutter expected to be installed later this year.

The machinery is part of the growing process for the fledgling firm that, in addition to serving the construction and packaging industries, is dabbling in ArtPrize and movies. The 20-member work force expects to increase by five in the next couple of years.

The business, which launched in June 2007, cut its teeth through the depths of the recession. Van Dyke called it good timing, figuring that Harbor Foam had a head start on



Remember Nessie? Harbor Foam Inc. will again take on ArtPrize projects, including a 50-foot flying pig piece. In 2009, Harbor worked on "Nessie on the Grand," now in John Ball Park.

PRESS FILE PHOTO

pulling through because the new venture was lean from the start.

"It's a blessing that we're not a big, fat company," said Van Dyke, a Hudsonville native and Unity Christian High School alumnus. "You could write a country song on what has happened the last two years. You just gotta keep going. We're just hustling. We're getting work. You can't wait for the phone to ring."

That said, it was a bit of good fortune that landed Harbor Foam work on "Red Dawn," a Hollywood feature film due in theaters this fall. Getting a boost from Michigan's tax incentives for in-state filming, the company supplied six truckloads of foam for construction of the movie set.

Harbor Foam also served as a single-source distributor of other items — adhesives, coatings, spray foams — for Wolverine Productions LLC.

The foam process

Roof panels and pre-fabricated walls are among the run-of-the-mill products manufactured at Harbor Foam, which occupies part of a former J.L. French metal plant at 2950

Prairie St. SW. Niche products include surfboards and disposable headrests for morticians.

All of it comes from resin beads that arrive in 2,205-pound "super sacks." The beads are expanded and then compressed into blocks.

The blocks are cut into shape using machines built mostly at Gateway Precision Technologies in Holland, and the scrap is shipped to Asia for recycling, for example, into picture frames.

Van Dyke and Kuperus learned the business from their grandfather, who worked at Falcon Foam and later started Michigan Foam, where Pat Van Dyke worked more than 20 years. The family brought plenty of experience to Harbor Foam.

Still, it was a first last year when the company worked on ArtPrize entries, including "Nessie." Some of the same artists are working with Harbor Foam this year on another fanciful piece.

"They're going to make a 50-foot flying pig," Van Dyke said.

Just add it to the portfolio.

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