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TECH MET EXPANDS INTO WASHINGTON COUNTY

*Tech Met, Inc. President, Mike Vidra
and General Manager, Jim Ringer*

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A PREMIER PRESENCE IN WASHINGTON

TECH MET EXPANDS INTO Washington County

By Rick Shrum



Jim Ringer and Mike Vidra



Production Lines at Tech Met

ESOP is no fable at Tech Met Inc. The company has been operating under an employee stock ownership plan since 2015 – a plan that is not common in the work place.

“We refer to our employees as employee owners,” said Jim Ringer, vice president of the Glassport-based manufacturer, which provides chemical milling services on components fabricated by other companies. Tech Met services high-temperature titanium and ferrous alloys and works primarily with the aerospace and medical industries. It is a major player in the aerospace engine fabricating market in the eastern United States.

Success is not a fable at this firm either. It was doing well enough two years ago that company officials decided to expand. In October 2016, Tech Met closed on purchasing a building in Donora Industrial Park, and 22 months later, is in a comfortable second location – 17 miles and one bridge south of its Allegheny County headquarters.

Comfortable is the byword, for this second home is a veritable mansion, with 88,000 square feet of space that is modern and attractive. Approximately 10 employees punch

in regularly there, although that figure varies depending on the project(s) Tech Met is handling for customers. “The firm,” Ringer said, “has moved all of its medical operations to Donora and one part of its aerospace work there.”

Perryman Co., of Houston, PA, is Tech Met’s primary medical customer. General Electric, Bell Helicopter and the defense industry are among its other clients.

Tech Met has a total workforce of 41, with some employees toggling between both Monongahela River towns, depending on needs. The company anticipates growth and needed the Washington County space because it has 51,000 square feet across four buildings in Glassport.

“We are a small business, but the outlook is very positive,” said Mike Vidra, Tech Met’s president. “The aerospace industry is doing very well and NASA spending is up.”

Jobs at Tech Met could be picking up as well. Vidra said the company plans to add 20 employees over the next four years, adding that, “We think that is realistic.” That would be a nearly 50 percent increase in workforce.”

“Five or six of those employees may come on board over the next couple of months,” he said. That would occur if Barnes Aerospace, an end user, gives Tech Met the go-ahead to proceed on a project. Barnes is a direct customer of General Electric.

Comfortable also is a byword for Ringer. He is a Washington County native, a 1982 Fort Cherry High School graduate with relatives living around Hickory and McDonald. Ringer, who now resides in Hempfield Township, splits time between Glassport and Donora, and is pleased to be working closer to his roots.

The company’s expansion to Washington County made sense. In addition to Perryman, Tech Met has working relationships with Dynamet Inc., of Chartiers Township; FPD Co., of Peters Township; and Allegheny Technologies Inc., which has a plant in Canton Township.

But Tech Met did consider venues elsewhere in Western Pennsylvania. “We also looked at Westmoreland County, a few locations in Fayette, and a couple of sites in Washington County,” Ringer said. “The biggest thing for us is we had a number of irons in the fire. It was a matter of which one we would use.”

Donora was selected, and that pleased Jeff Kotula, president of the Washington County Chamber of Commerce and executive director of the Washington County Industrial Development Authority. His response following the Tech Met purchase: “Donora’s industrial heritage is lending itself to attract new advanced manufacturers like Tech Met. We are proud of their investment in Washington County and look forward to their growth.”

That large blue building at the northern end of the industrial park is impressive outside and inside. The transformation did not take place quickly, though. Closing on the sale itself was delayed a month until environmental issues could be resolved on the site, where a U.S. Steel plant once went full bore.

Remediation and sale were merely the beginnings of a massive overhaul. “We put \$3 million into renovation and equipment for the first production operation,” Ringer said. “We needed a new roof, painted the outside of the building and renovated the parking lot. The building was in pretty bad shape.”

Poly One Corp. had operated on that site before shutting down approximately five years ago. Vandals added to the structure’s deplorable state.

Vidra, however, looked beyond the ugliness. “Overall, the shell of the building was in great shape,” he said. “This was a perfect location for us. There is a rail spur we can use. Trucks going in and out often have difficulties in other locations. Not here. The park is near Interstate 70. It is easy to get here. It just checked every box.”

The total cost of Tech Met’s purchase in Donora is not known. Ringer’s firm received two tax-exempt bank loans, totaling \$3 million, through the Washington County Industrial Development Authority, the conduit agency and an arm of Washington County Chamber of Commerce. Tech Met received \$1.6 million for property acquisition and construction costs and \$1.4 million for new equipment. No taxpayer money or government guaranty was involved.

Tech Met also received a funding proposal from the state that included a \$200,000 Pennsylvania First program grant and \$34,850 in WEDnetPA funding for employee training.

Ringer praised the Washington County Commissioners, Larry Maggi, Diana Irey Vaughan and Harlan Shober, Jr., as well as the county chamber and its senior vice president for economic development, Mary Stollar, for their support and diligence throughout the process. He also recognized Governor Wolf and his Governor’s Action Team for their assistance with the project.

Working in Donora has been a refreshing change for several workers who live nearby. Al Maldonado, a production supervisor from Carroll Township, is thrilled. “I love this place,” said the 21-year employee, who made the switch to Donora in April. “I have a five-minute ride to work now. I count my blessings.”

One employee works without pay, Ringer said during a tour of the “new” plant. Tech Met has a robot working on aerospace parts.

The company is marking a milestone anniversary – 30 years in business. Tech Met established itself in Glassport in 1988, on property previously used by Copperweld Corp., a steel company, for more than a half-century. The firm rebounded and rebuilt from a devastating fire in 1997, and now is in the second year of an expansion.

It is happening in the county where Jim Ringer grew up. This, for him, has been a good homecoming.

“Washington County has been with us every step of the way,” he said. “That is much appreciated. It is nice to get this facility because we feel like part of the community.”



Spray Robot