

Building for the Future

Lakehead Constructors is Ready for Another 100 Years of Success With New Superior Headquarters

By Kevin Ott

Lakehead Constructors, a company that has worked on some of the largest construction projects in the region since 1916, just completed a significant project of its own. The company has officially moved into its new 33,000-square-foot headquarters, a project that broke ground on April 1 but has been talked about for years, according to Lakehead Chairman, President and CEO Brian Maki.

“We’ve kept adding on to our old building as growth demanded, and it became more inefficient for loading and unloading, as well as the location not being ideal,” Maki said. “Shortly after our 100th anniversary, I decided that it would be time to look at a different facility.”

After looking at various existing structures around Duluth and Superior, Lakehead eventually decided it wanted to build something new. A six-acre site just off of Winter Street between the St. Louis River and AMSOIL Inc. was available, and with the help of the City of Superior, a deal was struck and the planning process began.

The \$6.5 million project demonstrates a strong commitment to the future success of the Superior business community, as well as to the Lakehead staff and the company’s customers. The facility, with about 15,000 square feet of office space and 18,000 square feet of shop space, features bright new offices for employees, break rooms on both floors, two conference rooms and a welcoming reception area. It’s an upgrade in almost every way – and the location is right where this company wants to be.

“The logistics for transportation with this building are much better,” Maki explained. “We get to stay in Superior,



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– CHAIRMAN, PRESIDENT AND CEO BRIAN MAKI

but by being close to the Bong Bridge, there’s easy access to Duluth as well as the Iron Range and North Shore with almost immediate freeway access.”

In addition to facilitating better transportation efficiency, the new headquarters building is highly energy efficient. It also allows Lakehead to reorganize its shop to better meet operational needs and to centralize office space so that each department can communicate more efficiently with each other. And, if necessary, the facility can be expanded upon to accommodate future growth.

“It’s a positive for everyone on staff,” said Cory Schmidt, the purchasing manager for Lakehead who has been a part of the project since day one. “There are many upgrades that improve our daily life. Everything was pretty scattered around at our old facility, so to have everything organized is pretty nice.”

Lakehead served as its own general contractor for the project and tapped local vendors for various parts of the build. Companies that assisted include Building Rescue, Northland Consulting Engineers, Benson Electric Co., A.G. O’Brien Plumbing & Heating Co. and Veshe Inc. While every new building project usually comes with some challenges, Schmidt says the project overall came together fairly quickly. “The development stage was as long as the building stage, so it was really a fast track,” Schmidt said. “We broke ground in April, and here we are.”

With a grand opening that was celebrated on Oct. 10, the Lakehead staff has settled into its new headquarters and is ready for many more years of serving customers. “Getting to be a part of this new development for a project this large was cool for me, and it’s a big deal for Lakehead’s history,” Schmidt said.

In addition to the Superior site, Lakehead made a \$2.4 million investment in moving from its former Mountain Iron location to Aurora, Minnesota. A former Minnesota Power (MP) building was purchased and renovated into a new office and tool storage space for Lakehead’s Iron Range staff. A seven-acre parcel of land near the MP building was also developed, where a new 8,400-square-foot shop was built to better accommodate equipment maintenance and to serve customers in the area.

LAKEHEAD HISTORY

Lakehead Constructors has been a major force in the Northland’s mining, power, railroad and paper industries since 1916. It all started with Roland C. Buck, who relied heavily on strong backs to build timber docks and structures around the Port of Duluth-Superior. With hard labor and hand-drawn designs on linen paper, Buck’s goal was to revolutionize the design and construction industries in large-scale harbor facilities. The company built a strong reputation for hard work and

reliability, working its way through the trying times of the Great Depression and World War II.

In 1955, the company was purchased from within by Les Olson, Mel Aselford and Floyd Ber-



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nard and renamed Lakehead Constructors. Its work on the harbor continued with a focus on the opening of the St. Lawrence Seaway and major projects such as the expansion of the dry docks at the local shipyard. From there, Lakehead's business expanded to include mining companies (including U.S. Steel) in Minnesota's flourishing taconite industry and the electrical industry with Minnesota Power.



Today, Lakehead's services have broadened even further to include preconstruction, construction management, design/build, general contracting, piping and specialized mechanical services, vacuum truck services and equipment leasing. It serves companies throughout the Upper Midwest in industries including commercial, institutional, industrial, manufacturing, mining and steel, oil and gas, power generation and railroad.

The company employs about 60 people on salary (48 in Superior and 12 in Aurora) and hired more than 1,000 tradespeople for various work just last year. Maki attributes Lakehead's longevity to these hard-working people. "People want to work here, and they take ownership in doing a good job for our customers," Maki said. "The way we go above and beyond with our service and quality is part of what's kept us around for 103 years."

EARNING A NATIONAL SAFETY DISTINCTION

In 2005, Lakehead Constructors took a big step in enhancing worker safety even more by implementing a zero injury program. It's

"This new building shows that we're here to stay and that we are looking forward."

— EXECUTIVE VICE PRESIDENT-RESOURCES STEVE JONES



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"We have some 20-, 30- and 40-year customers that have partnered with us for our timely work and emphasis on safety."

— EXECUTIVE VICE PRESIDENT-CONSTRUCTION RANDI MACKERETH

a concept developed by the Construction Industry Institute in Texas utilizing best practices and procedures that have been demonstrated by construction firms working without

lost-time injuries. And an even bigger step was taken when Lakehead sought ISO 9001 certification.

ISO 9001 certification is a quality standard developed by the International Organization of Standardization and is based on demonstrated and measurable processes. Following an 18-month process that began in January 2009 and culminated in an independent third-party audit, Lakehead was awarded ISO 9001:2008 certification in August 2010. More than a million companies hold ISO certification worldwide, but Lakehead is just one of about 20 contractors nationwide with this distinction.

"Safety isn't a la carte here – it's built in and managed just like every other function of the job," said Steve Jones, executive vice president of resources for Lakehead. "It takes hard work and everybody contributes and has a responsibility to themselves."

The safety precautions practiced at Lakehead include training, pre-shift and mid-shift safety meetings, as well as bimonthly and quarterly meetings with supervision and project management. "We've had good success with the program, but it's a never-ending process," Jones explained. "We have to work on it every day."

BIG PROJECTS AND LONGTIME CUSTOMERS

From the very beginning, Lakehead has worked on massive projects that require very large equipment and a committed workforce. And it's this history of successful projects that keeps customers coming back to Lakehead, some for several decades.

"We have some 20-, 30- and 40-year customers that have partnered with us for our timely work and emphasis on safety," said Randi Mackereth, Lakehead's executive vice president of construction. "Having relationships with these repeat customers is pretty rewarding for us."

For Lakehead Constructors, the new headquarters building is another one of those big projects. It also demonstrates to the community that this company is committed to Superior and to the customers it serves throughout the region.

"We've been happy here and our old facility has been a fixture in the community. But going forward, this new building shows that we're here to stay and that we are looking forward," Jones said. **PS**

Kevin Ott is a writer/editorial assistant at AdMax Inc.

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