



Rachel Jessen/The Hawk Eye

Jennifer Ruzzi works on a wire harness to be used in a Case backhoe at Cobo International's plant in Burlington.

Cobo takes ambitious steps

Italian firm will add tech center, products to Burlington facility.

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Construction, expansion, advanced technology and new products are underway at Cobo International's Burlington plant at 304 Division St.

"We have to be efficient. We can continue to stay in Burlington. We can continue to grow," said Gino Mainardi, CEO of Cobo International Plant.

Cobo International built its 30,000-square-foot manufacturing facility in Burlington in 2003, added a 20,000-square-foot logistics center at 401 S. Roosevelt Ave. in 2010 and will add a tech center this year.

The 8,000-square-foot tech center will be constructed inside the manufacturing plant and on top of the existing offices, creating an interior second floor. The new space will consist of two rooms — an operations room for training employees and an engineering room where a mechatronic system is implemented.



Photo submitted

The above schematic shows the interior of the new tech center at Cobo International, which will be built by S G Construction this year.

Mechatronics is a design process that includes a combination of mechanical engineering, electrical engineering, telecommunications engineering, control engineering and computer engineering. Cobo International will use the mechatronic system to create new products, work on products being transferred in and develop its own software for certain products.

Mainardi said in order for its products to stay on top in the construction industry, the

mechatronic system will help Cobo retain its competitiveness and high quality.

With vehicles and equipment in the construction industry involving more electronic control, Cobo decided to advance to the next-generation of technology.

"We would like to create here in Burlington added value," Mainardi said. "We have invested in a lot of technology."

The company will be looking to hire more engineers for the tech center. S G Construction Co.

of Burlington will build the addition, with construction scheduled to start any day and be completed by June.

One of the products to benefit from the design work in the new tech center will be a steering column, which is called a plug-and-play component. Rather than a company like Caterpillar, one of Cobo's customers, spend time piecing together 100 parts to make one steering column, Cobo

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BUSINESS



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Gina Leduc splices wires Wednesday to be used in the engine of a C&H forklift at Cobo International in Burlington.

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can do it for them. Then all Caterpillar will have to do is install the steering column into the appropriate piece of equipment. Cobo is about two years away from completing a steering column for a Caterpillar paver.

Cobo has been making the steering columns in a plant in Italy, but wants to transfer the work to the Burlington plant this year. Several companies in the U.S. that will use Cobo plug-and-play steering columns are Case New Holland (combines); Terex in Waverly (cranes); Gehl/Manitou Americas in West Bend, Wis. (wheel loaders) and Grove in Manitowoc, Wis. (lifts and material handlers).

When Cobo gets the steering column line up and running, it most likely can manufacture 5,000 units per year, said Massimiliano Ruzzi, the Burlington plant manager.

The plant also will add plastic molding capabilities to the steering column line, Ruzzi said.

"This is the future," Mainardi said.

The steering column line could add 15 to 20 employees to the manufacturing floor. Cobo International's workforce at Burlington's plant has 120 employees split between two shifts, and three employees working at the logistics center.

Production of display screens for construction equipment, currently made in Italy, could be moving to Burlington as well. The display screens come in six sizes from 4 inches up to 12-inch models, and help monitor a machine's engine and other working parts.

"We can create added value if we create partnerships," Mainardi said.

He cited a partnership Cobo has with Excavating Solutions in Noblesville, Ind. Cobo created a product, canview 3, which serves as an x-ray machine of sorts for an excavator — identifying



Rachel Jessen/The Hawk Eye

Cobo International plant manager Massimiliano Ruzzi, CEO Gino Mainardi and human resources and accounting manager Randy Stanbary are shown in the conference room Wednesday at the Burlington plant.

underground pipes. The operator of the excavator can work off the display screen of the Canview 3 and dig around the pipes without looking at the ground.

Another advance in technology Cobo is working on is called connectivity.

"All the parts have to communicate," Mainardi said.

Cobo is creating the next generation of sensor, which can be placed on every piece of farm equipment, such as tractors, planters, etc. An iPhone can be used as a bridge between the sensors and a computer server, where information is collected from work being done in the field. The technology already is being used in Europe, and Cobo wants to bring it to the U.S.

"We are very ambitious," Mainardi said.

Cobo started making cable reels for cranes at the Burlington facility about two or three months ago. One cable reel can weigh up to 200 pounds. The company makes the wiring and programs the sensors associated

with the cable reel in Burlington.

The bread and butter of the plant continues to be wire harnesses, which Cobo makes for Case New Holland, Caterpillar and John Deere.

A new client for wire harnesses is Brammo Motorcycles of Talent, Ore. The high-end electric motorcycle manufacturer manufactures about 1,500 motorcycles per year.

The manufacturing process of a harness, also called a Christmas tree, starts with cutting of wire, stripping the ends and adding an ID number. The plant creates thousands of different wires, depending on the customer, the product and the lengths needed.

If wires need to be spliced together, they are done via ultrasonic waves in a couple of seconds. In the past, the process was done by soldering and took about 30 seconds per splice.

A wire harness can consist of one lead wire on up to 500 wires. During a Thursday tour of the facility, a worker was piecing together a 300-wire harness for a Case backhoe, which typically

takes two hours.

Every wire harness is tested before it goes to the customer. Each wire within a harness is tested from point to point to make sure it works. The test of a 300-wire harness can take just seven minutes.

All of the finished products, plus the raw materials, are stored at the Roosevelt Avenue logistics center.

This past week, Cobo took part in Con Expo in Las Vegas. The largest construction show in the U.S. is held once every three years. Cobo had its steering columns, sensors, display panels and wire harnesses on display.

Cobo made its first product nearly 60 years ago in Italy. It was the first UNI column switch on a steering wheel, which switched a vehicle's lights from dim to bright and back.

With this week's announcement of expansion and new products in Burlington, Cobo International continues to be a leader in construction technology.