

# Flowing right along

## Employee-owned Grand River thriving during difficult times

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ASHTABULA, Ohio—Whether for customers, employees or the community, adding value has been a focus for Grand River Rubber & Plastics for nearly 45 years.

Established by the acquisition of the Ashtabula Division of Geneva Rubber in 1976, the 100-percent employee-owned company that sits along Lake Erie is known by its customers for its lathe-cut gaskets, drum and pail gaskets, and sweeper belts, using mostly EPDM but working in a range of materials, from nitrile and neoprene to silicone and polyether elastomers.

Grand River's 207 employees know the company for its family-oriented atmosphere, where ideas are valued from the top down and the ownership stakes—and stocks, allocated by salary and seniority—are high for everyone.

"I feel like I've got a say in things when we have meetings. They listen really well to people's ideas," Dana Armstrong, a belt cell operator at Grand River, said in a testimonial on the company's website.

And the community knows the company for its selfless outreach, as Grand River recently raised \$33,000 for the United Way of Ashtabula County and \$107,000 (over five years) in support of the Civic Development Corp. of Ashtabula County. About 180 of the company's 207 employees stepped up for the United Way donation, evidence of strong company support in times of crisis.

"We take our community involvement very seriously," said Donald Chaplin, president of Grand River since 2015. "Employees take pride in this and so does the company."

The company's outreach extended to its employees at the peak of the coronavirus pandemic, as Grand River provided Easter dinners for four—more than 800 individual meals—of ham, rolls, deviled eggs, potatoes, macaroni and cheese, and a dessert.

"It was one of the ways we helped them to de-stress," Chaplin said. "They understand the importance of us staying in business and they see us taking precautions, with masks to take home."

"We want them staying safe here and at home."

### A look back

In 1976, Rick Selip (*Rubber & Plastic News'* Executive of the Year in 1997 and 2014), Robert Jessup and Steve Knowles completed the Geneva Rubber acquisition and renamed the company Grand River. With its precision cutting to within ten thousandths of an inch, Grand River became known early on in the industry for its drum and pail and lathe-cut gaskets.

In 2001, the company entered the sweeper market with its flat belt division, and the next year began to sell its products in China, becoming a truly global company for the first time and gaining a large share, up to 90 percent, of the Asian market. With the acquisition of the flat drive belt division of Flexaust Inc. and capital improvements of \$2.4 million in the drum and pail manufacturing division in 2017, Grand River now serves all of North and South America, Europe and Asia, both OEM and aftermarket customers.

"Grand River is extremely well-positioned, both from a product and team



Grand River Rubber & Plastics employees are stock owners in the company, with the shares determined by salary and seniority.

perspective, and I'm eager to help the company take some pivotal next steps," said Keith Wyatt, named chief operating officer at Grand River in July 2019. "I'm excited to be working with Grand River's amazing team of problem solvers, innovators, and engineers to bring our superior quality products into new markets."

Other acquisitions in 2012 (Tri-Seals Lathe Cut Division) and 2013 (Icon Polymer Belt Division) helped Grand River round out its services and market share, now with 150,000 square feet of production space across four facilities and the ability to test various parameters of its gaskets and belts, from tension to stalled brush roll testing.

The company can produce a range of volumes in its production runs, and orders on average are for around 100,000 units.

"It really varies," said Alan Blankenship, product manager at Grand River. "It could be anywhere from 200 pieces to hundreds of thousands of pieces."

Chaplin noted that the company "will make more than 600 million units in a year," and that Grand River's leadership team remains happy with its Ohio location, truly "in the heart of it all."

"While some suppliers have moved offshore, there is no way we would manufacture belts anywhere but here," Chaplin said.

### Surviving, thriving during pandemic

Flexibility in adapting to customer needs and maintaining diversity in both materials and markets have helped Grand River, deemed an essential company, to thrive during the pandemic.

"Rarely are all the markets up and rarely are they all down," Chaplin said. "Being diverse has really helped us during the pandemic."

Grand River produces gaskets that are used in various medical products, which has seen enormous gains in past months, as well as electrical gaskets used in transformers and elastomers used in water meters and wastewater treatment—all strong, stable industries in virtually any economy.

Wyatt said an acceleration also was seen in the food service and food packaging industry throughout the past months.

"We are operational across the board," Wyatt said. "Even with the markets that are getting hit the hardest, we have seen other spikes in demand that we've been able to respond to, especially in food service and food packaging."

And Grand River continues to hire new employees despite the downturn in portions of the economy.

"We were in a hiring mode before the pandemic, and we have continued to add on the production side," said Wyatt. "The pace has slowed a bit but things are coming back on line. Sometimes it can be a challenge to find people but that has gotten better. We're keeping really good people and we are even able to add staff at this point."

Chaplin said there have been some shutdowns along the supply chain that have hindered Grand River, though that has seemed to right itself. And the company's products continue to be essential—whether it is assisting with a part for an oxygen sensor in the medical industry or a product related to drinking water systems.

"We are anxious for more commercial markets to open up," Chaplin said. "Right now, it's just the unknown as to how long (the effects of the pandemic) will last. Until then, we will have to weather the storm like everyone else."

Directly related to the pandemic, Grand River served the medical market and the wastewater treatment industry "in a big capacity" through its lathe-cut gaskets, Wyatt said, using a precision extrusion and curing process, which maintains advantages over injection molding and die-cutting.

With lathe cut, there are fewer tooling costs, smaller orders and the ability to make design changes easily. In addition, Grand River can handle rapid prototyping with a week's lead time with its in-house engineering support team.

In the workplace itself, Grand River has instituted best social distancing practices, with space between work stations and hand sanitizers located throughout the facility.

The company promotes social distancing during shift changes and in the break rooms, and cleaning occurs at the end of each shift for items used in the manufacturing process, such as air guns and hand tools.

"We have educated our work force on COVID-19 and have asked them to follow CDC recommendations," Blankenship said. "We have staggered our shifts to reduce the number of people in the facility and help minimize contact between our employees. We are fortunate to have a dedicated work force that is committed to enforcing the CDC recommendations in our facilities."

Wyatt said anyone who is out sick requires a return-to-work notice, and that Grand River workers need to "communicate, communicate, communicate."

### Wyatt comes on board

Wyatt said he was drawn to Grand River Rubber for its innovation, dedication to employees and opportunities for expansion. The company appealed to him after years of service with Enviroplas Inc., an ISO manufacturer of custom engineering plastic resins, where he served as both vice president of Global Supply Chain and chief operations officer.

Prior to that, Wyatt worked for Jasper Rubber Products Inc., where he served as executive vice president, operations and information technology, for nine years.

At Jasper, Wyatt said he led an initiative to implement new mixing technology, an innovation that increased quality and productivity in the rubber molded products division. Wyatt also made significant strides in the company's product development expansion.

"One of my biggest initiatives at Jasper was establishing a joint venture start-up and guiding them through getting a patent for the product and launching the new product," Wyatt said.

And at Enviroplas, Wyatt helped the company to diversify and expand its markets in automotive, electrical, lawn and garden, dental and medical. "Similarly to Grand River, everything Enviroplas manufactures is custom-formulated to meet the customers' needs," he said. "I had to learn about industry regulations such as NSF 61 and FDA compliance, which will be instrumental in my new role at Grand River."

At Grand River, Wyatt will be responsible for operations across the company's three main product lines: lathe-cut gaskets, vacuum sweeper belts, and drum and pail.

"Grand River has been highly successful in the markets it serves," he said. "My entire career thus far has been focused on growth and innovation. I look forward to enhancing the company's current operations."

Grand River's lathe-cut gasket line will get the majority of Wyatt's attention over the next year, he said, as he attempts to identify opportunities for expansion.

"All those things contributed to being attracted to Grand River," Wyatt said. "They have employees with strong lengths of service and dedication to the company. Donny (Chaplin) and I believe that there are opportunities for expansion, and there is a strong history of innovation with the company."

"I want to bring value to the organization, something I've tried to do throughout my career."



Wyatt