**Building Bridges**

**New facility means more jobs, opportunities**

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This past spring, The Beamery Group closed on the former For Bare Feet sock factory property in Helmsburg, finalizing months of negotiations with the county.

When the county chose The Beamery Group’s bid, it also rejected two others, including one from local company Stainless Manufacturing and Automation. SMA owner David Rost said he had been trying to lease space at the property even when the county owned it. But through cooperation between Rost and The Beamery Group owner David Watters, Brown County did not have to trade one manufacturer for the other.

Rost began leasing space from The Beamery Group in July and finally has the space his business needs. The former bid-competitors are even working together.

“We’ve kind of helped each other move in — they’ll use one of our forklifts to move their equipment and vice versa. So it’s been a good relationship,” Watters said.

SMA is a metal fabrication company that specializes in manufacturing automated machinery for use in food processing, pharmaceutical and manufacturing facilities. It works with customers all over the country, even though Rost said he incorporated the company only about a year ago. The shop floor is a work in progress, and Rost said it won’t be fully completed until next year. Yet, some machinery is in place, and SMA is working in the field, doing installations for customers, he said.

Watters said he sees opportunity for the two companies’ operations to complement one another. He has talked with Rost about the possibility of SMA making the hoops for the whiskey barrels that The Beamery Group will manufacture.

“One of the nice things about this property is the potential for both of our companies to expand — without limit,” Watters said.

**Jobs and opportunity**

The Beamery, the group’s flagship timber-frame construction operation, employs five people in Helmsburg: four in the shop and a designer. The Beamery Group’s original bid to get the property projected having 16 to 25 workers, expanded to 32 to 56 workers by the third year. Bud Holmes, project manager at The Beamery, said he would hire another worker right now if he could.

“I’m probably more cautious than Bud because I’m the employer,” Watters said. “At the same time, we are definitely getting to the point where we’re going to be looking for more people.”

SMA is not a part of The Beamery Group but employs seven people on the property: six on the floor and one designer in the office.

Work at The Beamery tends to be highly skilled, Watters said.

Employees need to have potential to grow and learn. “I don’t have to tell my guys to come to work,” he said. “They come to work because they love what they do.”

Watters said The Beamery Group most likely will not expand until next year.

“It’s been a bit disruptive to the business, the last six months,” he said, referring to the move-in process. “We’re just finally getting back on track.”

**Getting things in shape**

Since May, Watters and his crew — and even a couple friends — have been hard at work on the property. They installed an overhead door and bright, high-efficiency lights in the north factory building where The Beamery’s main workshop is. They tore out some of the second floor in the south building to make space for SMA. They also put extensive work into refurbishing the former Helmsburg school building, where The Beamery’s offices are.

Watters and his crew worked well into the summer, stripping and refinishing floors, repainting walls, and pulling down old paneling in one of the basement rooms of the former school building. The northeast basement room is being turned into an apartment, which Watters will occupy from time to time. Watters has a lot of ideas for the school building alone. He wants to put in a commercial kitchen available for businesses that need one but can’t afford to build one for part-time use. A commercial kitchen also would enable that building to host wedding receptions and family reunions. He has even discussed some of the kitchen details with Rost.

The northeast room on the upper floor was stripped to the original wood floor. The room resembles a small ballroom, and Watters said it is one of his favorite aspects of the property. It now is being used as a yoga studio twice a week by local resident Patty Donaldson. She and her husband — also named David — are friends of Watters and helped with some of the building refurbishing work. Donaldson has been teaching yoga in the area for 15 years, and Watters offered her the use of the space in part to thank her for their help.

The other three rooms on the upper floor are being used as office space for The Beamery. Watters said he would like to eventually move his offices to the north building with his shop, freeing up the entire school building for more community-related businesses and events.

“We really want to orient this more toward public space,” he said. “That’s really my vision for this building.”

**Future growth?**

Watters is constantly on the lookout for businesses that will fit with his vision for the property. He would like to see it develop as a group of cooperative businesses that not only compliment each other indirectly, but work together directly when possible.

“We’re trying to get out there and get into the community,” Watters said. “We have the asset of space, so what I’m trying to do is find people who are doing things similar to what we’re doing.”

Watters has had discussions with a bakery and a distillery. He also has talked with a local cabinet maker who is interested in space for classes.

Touring the second floor of the south building, Watters sees potential for a place where people can train for any number of vocations that feed into the work he wants to do.

Along with the property and standing buildings, The Beamery Group bought an unassembled, 14,000-square-foot building from the county, which Watters anticipates attaching to the south building as space is needed.

The fiber optic lines For Bare Feet founder Sharon Rivenbark had installed put the property on par with some commercial parks in Indianapolis, Watters said.

After a 2011 fire, For Bare Feet — Brown County’s only factory, which employed 151 people — moved to Martinsville partly because water pressure was too low for a sprinkler system. Though The Beamery Group was able to get fire insurance, it would be substantially cheaper if sprinklers were installed, Watters said. He said he has talked to Brown County Water Utility and is looking into the possibility of buying a tank for on-site storage. If the tank he is looking at turns out to be large enough, Watters said, he would be willing to have it set up so that the surrounding community could use it. He also would be willing to work with the county if its leaders decided to develop something, he said.

“Obviously, the priority right now is base business and getting more short-term income coming in on the property,” Watters said.