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A new coat for the economy by: Michael Willard, O-N-E Editor

There's a new river of industry flowing into Newton and Catawba County — a Powder River, to be exact.

Powder River Technologies officially celebrated its grand opening last week at the Mid-County Business Park in Newton. While the new industry has been in production about a year, Powder River owner and founder Mark Sigmon said he didn't want to jump the gun in celebrating the company's development.

“We wanted to hold off on the grand opening until we were confident we could make it,” Sigmon said. “Business has been good so far. We have doubled our sales from last year so we are going in the right direction.”

With a full-time staff of two and a part-time staff of three, Sigmon said he is hoping Powder River Technologies will quickly grow at its home on Industrial Road. His goal is to ultimately employ 15 people at the facility.

Powder River is among an important part of Newton's economy said Newton Mayor Robert Mullinax. As a small business, Powder River, like hundreds of other small businesses in the community, will help Catawba County's total economy rebound, he said.

“We've lost six thousand jobs in the past few years,” Mullinax said. “We are not going to replace 6,000 jobs 250-300 jobs at a time. It's folks like you that are going to replace those jobs five, 10 or 15 jobs at a time. It takes people like you who have the gumption to make a family-run business go, and we are going to be here to support you.”

Mullinax said Powder River's contribution will impact Newton's economy in the future.

The idea for Powder River was hatched out of Sigmon's 17-year career at Corning Cable Systems. A 1985 graduate of N.C. State's mechanical engineering school, Sigmon worked in Corning's research and development department for eight years, and spent

inventor of the year for Corning's cable division.

However, during the last round of Corning's layoff's Sigmon saw an opportunity to move out on his own, said Bebe Leitch, director of existing industry service at Catawba County Economic Development Corp.

"After 17 years of engineering in a large corporation, I knew that I wanted to try something on my own," Sigmon said. "I felt confident that my experience and knowledge gained during that time would give me a decent chance at succeeding."

Sigmon began by seeking assistance from the CCEDC.

"Mark came to me about two years ago. After 17 years at Corning he wanted to start a new business," Leitch said. "We must have looked at every available building in the area. Mark was very specific that he wanted to stay in the Newton area."

After a lengthy search CCEDC and Sigmon found a location for Powder River in Newton's Mid-County Industrial Park. Since then Sigmon and his staff have gotten production at the facility well under way.

Powder River offers a wide range of service under one roof. One of these services is powder coating, which provides a hard-durable finish that is resistant to chipping peeling and scratching. With powder coating available in a variety of colors, it is also more environmentally friendly than traditional wet, paint, CCEDC reports.

Among customers of Powder River is Timmerman Manufacturing. Powder River provides powder coating for Timmerman's outdoor furniture line.

"If you really want something to last for a long time, you can't get anything better," Timmerman Manufacturing owner Dan Timmerman said of the powder coating process for outdoor furniture.

As Powder River aims to grow its workforce, it will utilize a relationship developed with Catawba Valley Community College. Sigmon has employed students in CVCC's welding and drafting program, and he said the students' need for part-time work will accommodate their schedule, while being a perfect match for his needs. Meanwhile, it offers important experience for the students.

"We at CVCC recognize the importance of small businesses in the area giving our students the opportunity to get on-the-job experience while they are still in school," said Randy Hedrick, CVCC welding technology instructor. "While working part-time at Powder River Technologies, our students are learning first-hand exactly what businesses like this are looking for in an employee, as well as gaining experience in how those

needs of the employer and the employee.”

With this partnership taking off, area leaders see the growth of Powder River as a positive sign for the economy.

“The opening of Powder River Technologies facility in Newton is yet another sign that our local economy is rebounding and we thank Mark Sigmon for his commitment to this new business and the faith he has shown in our county by locating it in Newton,” said Catawba County Commission member Lynn Lail. “We are even more fortunate whenever we can add a new industry that is going to grow in the future.”

Leitch also said Powder River’s grand opening last week was a good announcement for the industrial community in Catawba County.

“It has been a pleasure to work with Mark to find the right location for Powder River Technologies. Small businesses like Powder River are integral to the success of our local economy,” Leitch said. “We are grateful to Mark for his investment in this community and look forward to working with him for a long time to come.”