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Barre firm's prospects get a jolt  
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TIMES ARGUS STAFF

BARRE - Just two years ago, SB Electronics on South Main Street in Barre was a company in trouble. From as many as 100 employees, it was down to 30 and running out of options in a poor economy.

Monday, Lt. Gov. Brian Dubie took a tour of the plant and found a bustling place and a company on the comeback.

Now named SBE Inc., but still doing business as SB Electronics, the firm has signed a two-year license agreement to make capacitors for stun-gun maker Taser of Arizona. The Taser contract marks a shift to higher-end, more specialized components and away from smaller, cheaper capacitors now primarily made in China.

"We have gone from a company that was struggling to hold on ... to prices sustainable for the Vermont economy," Edward Sawyer, company president and chief executive officer, told Lt. Gov. Dubie.

For some longtime local employees, the business has been an economic lifeline for decades.

Located in an old 30,000-square-foot facility, the building was once a stone shed for Rock of Ages Corp. In 1945, during World War II, Sprague Electric Co. contracted with Rock of Ages to make capacitors, said Mark Browning, vice president of sales and marketing.

Invented 20 years before by Robert C. Sprague of Massachusetts, the electronic components that store energy then release it quickly were in demand for use in fuses for bombs, Browning said.

Rock of Ages Capacitor Division was born and mostly women went to work making the small capacitors. By 1953, the Barre facility employed a remarkable 940 people, but in the 50 years that followed, the company slowly shrank.

Sprague Electronic owned it for a time. Then, in 1985, Browning's father, Perry Browning, purchased it in a management buyout and renamed it SB Electronics. It had been on the brink of closure, but under Perry Browning's ownership, the company began to flourish once again.

"In our heyday, ... we had over 100 people working here, running three shifts, but we were making capacitors that only sold for 20 cents," Mark Browning said.

By 2001, SB Electronics was struggling once more. This time it was bought by Mark Browning and Sawyer in 2002.

Under the younger Browning and Sawyer's ownership, SB Electronics has once again found a new economic model.

Sawyer said the company stopped trying to hold onto lighting ballast markets now dominated by low-priced competition from Asia and Mexico. Instead, it contracted with Taser and others to produce more expensive and more specialized components.

A larger unit is sold to airport radar systems used by air traffic controllers for \$100 a part, Sawyer said.

And the Taser guns are being used as non-lethal alternative by police, security guards, on airplanes, and by the Department of Defense in Iraq, Sawyer said.

The contracts have left SB Electronics busy. On Monday, machines wound plastic and aluminum foil strips into capacitors. The aluminum carries the electricity. The plastic film holds the charge, Browning explained.

The company winds 200,000 capacitors a week. Employee Samuel Bussiere showed Dubie how the machines worked. Bussiere has worked at the Barre facility for 42 years. He's not unique.

Barbara Machel has worked at the plant for 50 years.

Young and old, male and female workers dotted SB Electronics' manufacturing floor on Monday. The company is hiring. It's brought back several laid-off workers. It hopes to add about 10 more in the next year, Sawyer said.

"With all the bad news ... there are some success stories that are starting to catch hold," he said.

Walking across polished floors glimmering in the old building, Dubie took it all in.

He thanked Browning and Sawyer for the invitation to visit and wished the employees a happy thanksgiving.

"You're making products that will make this a safer world," he told the employees gathered round at the end of their shift.

If pilots had Taser guns in their cockpits on Sept. 11, 2001, the World Trade Center and Pentagon attacks may never have occurred, said Dubie, an airline pilot himself.

Dubie promised to relate the company's successes to state economic officials and the governor, and he took questions from the employees.

He was asked only one: "Dean going to get the presidency?"

"He's working hard and he's getting some traction," said Dubie of Dean. And he praised the Dean campaign for bringing notice to the state. "If that helps grow jobs and helps employers and employees, hey, we'll take that," Dubie said.

But Dubie said he supported President Bush.

"We've got a tough situation in the world right now. I think we've got to support our troops and support the government right now," Dubie said.

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