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Frank B. Fuhrer Wholesale Co. pursuing major expansion of distribution business in Westmoreland County

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When it comes to explaining the reason for his company's big move in the works, Frank B. Fuhrer III detailed the need of a key ingredient in the beer and beverage business.

Beyond the barley, water and hops used to make beer, Fuhrer and his family's Frank B. Fuhrer Wholesale Co. also needs space and lots of it to keep growing as the region's most dominant distributor, long one of the largest in the country and a rare breed selling most major beer brands.

While the firm has long operated with a 370,000-square-foot operation on 24 acres on the South Side, Fuhrer said the company has been maxed out there for some time, leading to an ongoing search for expansion.



JOE WOJCIK

Frank B. Fuhrer Wholesale Company is looking to expand.

Frank B. Fuhrer Wholesale Co. is now closing in on buying a former Beckwith Machinery property totaling 40 acres at the junction of Routes 22 and 66 on which the plan is to build a new 300,000-square-foot warehouse and office facility.

Positioning the huge new building for future expansion needs, Fuhrer, CEO of the company, said the strategy calls for keeping about half the current operation at its established facilities at 3100 East Carson Street on the South Side and moving the other half to the new Delmont facility.

"You hope when you make a move like this that it sets up the next generation for the next 30 or 40 years," said Fuhrer, now 63, and thinking of the future for a dominating business that ranks among the region's largest private companies.

He added "we're probably overbuilding for the short-term" in terms of the scale of the new facility that will offer ample room to grow into in the years to come.

Fuhrer wouldn't provide the specifics for the price tag of the new expansion project, only calling it an "expensive endeavor."

The company has yet to close on buying the site, he said, as it awaits approval from the state Department of Environmental Protection, given the site's proximity to a stream.

He hopes to break ground on the construction project this year and to be able to move into the new facility by fall of 2023.

It's a major expansion project Fuhrer added will also include the installation of new automation systems in both the new Delmont facility as well as on the South Side.

With a staff of about 325 employees, Fuhrer expects most of the central administrative staff will stay put on the South Side with upwards of 100 to 120 people likely to shift to working at the new Delmont operation, which will include some office space as well.

Long a stable business, serving as a master wholesaler for both AB Inbev as well as Molson Coors along with a long roster of craft beers and hard seltzers, Frank B. Fuhrer Wholesale Co.'s overall business has been flat in recent years, acknowledged Fuhrer.

A lack of space is the main culprit, he added, as the company has negotiated the various shifts of the pandemic as customers have often been drinking less at bars and restaurants, bolstering business at beer distributors instead.

"The business has shifted a lot," he said, of the influence of the pandemic. "We were considered an essential business which is fortunate."

He further explained the lack of extra space has kept the company on the sidelines from chasing new lines of business, whether from new brewers seeking to distribute into Pennsylvania or more of the various hard seltzers and "alcopops" that have become more and more popular.

"We really haven't been aggressive with new brands and new suppliers coming to Pennsylvania," he said. "We really haven't been aggressive with non-alcoholic product."

Look for that to change as the company adds more space in its new facility.

He added it wasn't easy to find the right location, finding opportunities more limited and expensive in Allegheny County and running into competing interest from the likes of Amazon for one site, the former Eastland Mall property in North Versailles.

But he expects the road access at the new Delmont location will enable the company to serve is 10-county territory and hopes it will offer enough space to expand into for at least 10 years or so.

"We've still have a long road ahead of us but it's an exciting start right now," he said.

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