



BUILDING BUSINESS

on the Prairies

BY LINDSAY JEAN
Photography by Lindsay Jean

SaskPower helps grow companies from the ground up



Jim Mabee and Jim Nowakowski (left) team up to do the best for their companies.

Sparks fly at JNE Welding, where SaskPower helps business in Saskatchewan.

difference, you know, when the economy's good or bad. They're always happy to see SaskPower come, but when the economy is slow, they like us a lot more because they really want our work."

Good times or bad, there is never a shortage of innovation in the province. Mabee says Saskatchewan's farming landscape influences the talent, and it only makes sense for SaskPower to reap those benefits.

"People always talk about how ingenious the Saskatchewan farmers are to retrofit their equipment or manufacture their own farm equipment," says Mabee. "I think we've been able to take advantage of some of that innovation, not only with manufacturing stuff for us, but improving it."

And Nowakowski agrees. His company has been a major supplier of steel transmission towers for SaskPower for many years now. He found a faster way to build the Queen Elizabeth to Condie towers than his competitors and for less money. Finishing the job successfully gave Nowakowski the confidence to start bidding on other major projects.

For Nowakowski, SaskPower does more than buy products locally. The company builds businesses.

"They do help build infrastructure in Saskatchewan, and I don't mean just providing power. They build expertise," he suggests.

"They've been instrumental, not just in helping our business develop into what it is today, but numerous others in all kinds of different areas. I hope they never lose sight of the value that brings to the province. It has been significant." ■

It's almost like watching two friends reunite.

One talks animatedly as the other leans in to catch his words over the sound of grinders on metal. Brilliant sparks fly around them at the JNE Welding production facility, but neither seems to notice. It's all business here.

In reality, Jim Mabee is checking up on Jim Nowakowski, president and general manager of JNE Welding in Saskatoon. As supervisor of quality assurance and supplier development for SaskPower since 1990, it's Mabee's job to maintain close relationships with local suppliers.

It's not a case of Mabee crossing his fingers and hoping the product turns out the way it should.

Close contacts help Mabee ensure the goods and services bought within the province are high quality and meet standards. But when the program was new in 1983, and relationships were not harvested yet, with some items,

the quality wasn't there.

"Some of the stuff that initially got made here was pretty low quality, because they (suppliers) really didn't know what they were up against to start with. Research and Development helped them get a lot of the stuff up to speed, up to meet our specs," says Mabee.

Only 37 per cent of the company's goods and services were Saskatchewan-made at the time. SaskPower started to invest more effort in building expertise in the province. Items from Stores were brought to manufacturers to see if they could make the same product for less. One of those companies was JNE Welding.

"We started by doing substations," says Nowakowski.

Having only started his venture a few years earlier, the entrepreneur welcomed the business. With seven or eight employees at the time, he was thrilled to win the bid.

"I think that I always believed that I could do whatever I was asked to do, whatever the challenge may be," says Nowakowski. "We were always excited about it. SaskPower has been very, very good in bringing us quite a few challenges over the years."

Today, his company employs roughly 150 people. He attributes much of the success to SaskPower's supplier development program. Nowakowski adds having a diversified customer base was key to weathering tough times, like when a particular industry or customer was slow.

"We certainly looked at SaskPower as an opportunity to get into a little bit bigger league, a little bit more consistent supply of work."

Mabee knows that is the case for many Saskatchewan manufacturers. SaskPower now purchases roughly 80 per cent of its goods and services in the province. And, over the last 25 years, the company has invested \$6 billion in the Saskatchewan economy,

an average of \$241 million per year. Mabee estimates there are roughly 300 or 400 individual companies supplying SaskPower with goods and services.

With a vast array of Saskatchewan suppliers, Mabee says his role in the past 10 years has been to ensure the current supplier list is making the best possible products. The department has stopped actively searching for more manufacturers and turned to improving quality instead. While it has improved exponentially, there are still quality concerns.

"I think you do (have concerns) with in-province (and) out-of-province (suppliers). With any company that you deal with, sometimes there's some quality issues."

Nowakowski knows his business has benefited from the attention. He appreciates how SaskPower's role doesn't end when the bid is won. They help manufacturers become more reliable suppliers.