

'Brick City' is Back!



Brenda Fike

Standing in front of the newly unveiled sign are (from left) Matt Moore, U.S. Department of Agriculture; Rosa Martinez, U.S. Department of Treasury; Scott Zajac, Advantage Capital; U.S. Sen. Kit Bond; Frank Cordie, Mid America Brick CEO; and Missouri Governor Jay Nixon. A photo gallery of the day's event is published in the "Photos" section of The Mexico Ledger webpage.

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Mexico, Mo. —

Standing at the site of the old A.P. Green Brick refractory and shielding their eyes from the sweltering June sun, local politicians, executives and Mexico residents all counted down. 3 ... 2 ... 1...

Then, at 12:11 p.m. Friday, two giant blue tarps fell away to reveal a pair of towering signs that boom the name of Mexico's newest brick factory in tall, blue letters: Mid America Brick.

"We welcome all of you to Mexico, 'Brick City' as it will once be known again," Sen. Kit Bond, R-Mo., told the crowd shortly before the tarps came down.

Those falling tarps marked the last step in a nearly four-year effort by local officials, bankers and former A.P. Green executive Frank Cordie to bring a brick business back to the original Firebrick Capital of the World, eight years after the A.P. Green plant closed in 2002. The new plant was unveiled on the 100th anniversary of A.P. Green's first day of business in 1910. There will be a few differences between the new plant and A.P. Green. Mid America brick won't make firebrick, which is used to build ovens and kilns. Instead it will manufacture facebrick, which is used in building construction.

There also won't be as many jobs - at least not right away. The new plant expects to employ 70-80 people when its first two kilns are in operation, versus the 2,000 people who previously held jobs at A.P. Green.

Even so, Friday was a day of celebration at the plant.

A crowd of more than 200 people gathered under a tent to hear speeches from several people involved in bringing the plant to fruition. Among the guests and speakers were Mexico

residents, former A.P. Green workers and several politicians, including Bond, Gov. Jay Nixon, state Rep. Steve Hobbs, state Sen. Wes Shoemyer and officials from the U.S. Department of Agriculture. All praised the creation of the new plant.

Retired A.P. Green workers Val Eikel and Bill Alton helped direct traffic at the ceremony for Mid America Brick. As they waved cars into parking spaces Friday, the two recalled their old plant, saying they were cautiously optimistic that Mid America Brick would have a positive impact on the community.

"It's going to take a while," Eikel said. "There's a lot to this plant."

Alton agreed, recalling how much work the A.P. Green plant and National Refractories had generated for local workers, some of whose families had worked at the plants for generations.

"I worked seven days a week, 24 hours a day one time [at A.P. Green]," he said.

All of Mexico's City Councilmen were present at the ceremony as was Mayor Ron Loesch.

Loesch was the first of many to note Cordie's persistence on the project, saying its reopening marked a turning point for the city.

"Today Mid America Brick begins a new era for this landmark facility here in Mexico," he said. "What a wonderful day this is for Mexico."

Bond then took the stage and spoke about his grandfather, A.P. Green, operating the plant at the turn of the 20th century. The Mexico native, who is retiring from the Senate this year after four terms, received a standing ovation from the crowd and said the new business is critical to the local economy.

"This is about the best news we can have in these tough economic times," he said. "We've lost tens of thousands of jobs and in smaller cities, like Mexico, we've felt the brunt of plant closings."

Gov. Jay Nixon said the plant opening was also positive news for the state economic recovery, noting that 31,000 jobs have been created throughout the state over the past four months. He said many of those jobs had been created in small towns like Mexico.

"This is great news for the city of Mexico and Audrain County," he said. "It's also a great day for Missouri's economy, which continues to show positive signs of steady recovery."

The plant is expected to produce 65 million bricks a year once it is fully operational and it is one of the few facebrick manufacturers in the state, a key economic advantage, because bricks are difficult to transport long distances due to their weight.

Cordie had worked since November 2006 to re-open the plant, negotiating with private lenders and local, state and federal government agencies to secure financing for the project. Several speakers praised his persistence on the project.

Cordie thanked his wife, Judy, for her patience throughout the process and then vowed the business would succeed.

"Next year this time we'll have trucks of brick made in Mexico, Missouri leaving here headed for construction sites," he said.

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