

## Lenze is Leaving

By Scott Rochat

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Lenze Corp. told employees Tuesday that it would shut down its Emporia plant at 1730 E. Logan Ave. and shift operations to the East Coast.

The plant will close April 30, general manager Gene Wood confirmed this morning. Its operations will be merged with U.S. company headquarters in Uxbridge, Mass.

"It's a strategic business decision," Wood said. "It's not financial and it's not related to the people. We're financially strong and we have great people here. But our customers are looking for one-stop shopping and we can't do that when we're on the East Coast and the Midwest."

Lenze is a German-owned company that builds products such as gear motors, clutches, brakes and mechanical drive systems. Emporia's plant was under a member of the Lenze Group called AC Tech.

"Our product is imported from Germany and logistics were getting more and more difficult," Wood said.

Workers were caught by surprise when the announcement came Tuesday afternoon.

"They just told us about 30 minutes ago," a worker said around 3:45 p.m. Tuesday. "We had no warning."

The worker asked not to be named.

Betty Senn of Emporia's Workforce Development Center said Tuesday afternoon that Lenze workers had already started coming to her for help with the unemployment process.

"We're having difficult times here in our community," Senn said.

The company will discuss severance options in individual meetings with employees. According to a letter received by employees, Emporia workers will be given the chance to apply for openings in Uxbridge.

Wood said that severance would be based on years of service. Some employees had been with the plant nearly 10 years, going back to when it first opened in Emporia.

"The hardest part of making this decision was the people," Wood said.

He said that the Emporia plant now has about 30 employees. In September, the company had 34, according to the Regional Development Association, but some workers had since left the company and the jobs were left unfilled.

Lenze Power Transmission was the first company to come into Industrial Park III, starting operations in 1997. The company had looked at opening a plant in Kansas City but began to consider Emporia on the advice of Didde Corp., an Emporia-based company that did a lot of business with Lenze.

"You guys did a very professional and thorough job," then-Lenze president told Emporia representatives at the 1997 ribbon-cutting. "Your proposal was really more thorough, presented better and thought out better and really a better proposal (than Kansas City's)."

When Didde declared bankruptcy in 2000, Lenze was one of the creditors. But the company appeared to remain in good health. RDA executive director Kent Heermann said that as recently as a year ago, the Emporia plant was talking about expansion.

"This comes as something of a surprise," Heermann said.

Heermann said the plant would probably be attractive to other industrial prospects. It measures about 30,000 square feet and includes 10 acres of open space for expansion.

"I think it does have some marketability, locally, regionally and nationally," Heermann said. "I get leads in all the time for buildings that size."

Senn said she was hoping to set up a "rapid response" session with Lenze workers to help them through the unemployment process, but that nothing has been scheduled yet. Workers seeking information can call Senn or anyone else at the center at 342-3355.

The anonymous Lenze worker said he wasn't sure what he would do next.

"I don't know," he said. "Maybe travel, commute to a different city. I like Emporia, but it doesn't have much for jobs."

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