

Axis of Phelps posts steady growth over last five years

By **AMANDA FOLTS**

afolts@fltimes.com



PHELPS — For a company that works with such small parts, Z-Axis Inc. has seen a lot of growth over the last five years.

The electronics design and manufacturing firm has experienced that growth in areas from hiring to purchasing new equipment.

In fact, \$1 million worth of new equipment was put into place last year.

“We’ve spent a million in the last year, expanding our business without using any taxpayer money, any IDA or any grants,” said Z-Axis president Michael Allen.

The new equipment includes a \$500,000 pick-and-place machine that places tiny parts on circuit boards.

The large machine is in the manufacturing area of the 32,000-square-foot building that houses Z-Axis. A circuit board goes into one machine, and a camera looks it over and aligns it to a stencil. Then a solder paste is squeezed onto the board. The board then goes down the line and into the pick-and-place machine where parts are placed on the paste. The front of the pick-and-place machine holds roll after roll of tape with the minuscule parts waiting to be placed onto the paste on the circuit boards by 10 robots.

When that part of the process is complete, the circuit board goes further down the line and has more parts placed on it. Then, the whole thing goes in an oven where the solder paste is melted.

An automatic optical inspection follows through the use of a high-speed photograph.

That pick-and-place machine is the newest line the company has brought in. It was manufactured in the Netherlands and weighs 8,200 pounds. Allen said it’s known as a pick-and-place machine because the robots pick the parts up off the tape and place them on the circuit board. The machine can place 60,000 parts an hour.

Usually, the parts employees work with are very small. Allen said the smallest parts they work with regularly are 10 thousandths of an inch by 20 thousandths an inch, adding a lot of work is done under microscopes.

In another room of the facility, engineering test tables are piled with various electronics equipment and wires. In one corner of that room, the manufacturing engineering manager and a couple of people in their engineering cop recently were reviewing a test fixture. Down the hall, another room housed cable harness work and coil winding.

In another section of the building was the BEAR Power Supply

line, where 3,000 power supplies are built every week.

Z-Axis was founded 21 years ago by Carl Beechler in an old sauerkraut factory on Eagle Street. It was moved to the current Route 96 location in 2000. When the company started, it manufactured CRT displays, which would go into things such as vision testers and industrial process equipment.

Allen was the company’s first employee and five years ago, when Beechler retired, he was promoted from director of engineering to president.

Allen says he is not one to sit “at the 10,000-foot view,” but is a hands-on manager and still is involved in some circuit designs and picking out equipment for production.

The company started reinventing itself about a decade ago and now does a lot of contract manufacturing work building circuit boards, about half of which also are designed by company employees.

The company also designs, manufactures and sells custom power supplies under its BEAR Power Supplies line and does text terminals under its Boundless Technologies line.

When Allen took over as president, he said, monitors still represented more than 50 percent of the business. Now, they make up about 5 percent.

Though some companies have been hit by the recession, Z-Axis has seen growth over the last five years. The company’s combined business has grown 34 percent each year, compounded, during that span, and in the last year alone grew more than 70 percent.

Additional equipment purchased over the past year was meant to increase capacity, and Allen said last spring the company invested \$300,000 to double that manufacturing capacity.

“In one year our capacity has gone up six to one,” he said.

As for employment, Z-Axis currently is hiring for a few positions and in the last year went from 61 to 80 full-time employees. When Allen took over five years ago, the company had about two dozen employees.

The company operates on one shift, and Allen said one of his goals is to keep it that way. He called the company a “big family,” adding that they have picnics and will “have a party at the drop of a hat.” Last year they celebrated achieving the ISO 9001 Certification, an international quality certification.

In the last five years, Allen said, one reason the company has been able to grow is a powerful management team.

“So, I have new management in virtually every department in the last five years that has allowed me to do this, real professional people,” he said.



Business of the Week
Z-Axis Inc.
916 Route 96,
Phelps
www.zaxis.net

wise from top:

any President Michael Allen displays the inside of a power sup-

stands beside Z-Axis’ latest piece of equipment, a pick-and-place

Collett, who works in the winding department, puts a shield on

holds a printed circuit board assembly that has about 200 indi-