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'The mill has had a long history of changing and adapting'

Caleb Coder, vice president and general manager

# ND Paper looks 100 years ahead



A worker looks on as a roll of paper is moved along the production line on Oct. 12 at the ND Paper mill in Biron.

PHOTOS BY TORK MASON/USA TODAY NETWORK-WISCONSIN

## Biron mill switches to brown paper in new facility

Becky Jacobs and Caitlin Shuda

Wisconsin Rapids Daily Tribune  
USA TODAY NETWORK - WISCONSIN

BIRON — There are two large piles outside the Biron paper mill. One includes stacks of logs, cut from a forest and transported to the central Wisconsin village. The other is made up of bales of recycled paper and boxes, collected from stores and people's recycling bins. The logs reflect the mill's past, while

the bales represent its future.

Shortly after buying the facility in 2018, ND Paper announced it would invest \$189 million in the Biron mill. During the COVID-19 pandemic, employees converted one of the paper machines from making lightweight coated paper for magazines and catalogs to producing packaging grade paper for cardboard boxes. Next year, the mill's

See ND PAPER, Page 3A



Construction on a new recycling facility is seen in progress.

## Column: Honor our mother's legacy

Keep Ellen Kort Peace Park as planned

Cindy Kort, Kerry Kort Williamsen, Jayme Bleick Baehman and Denise M. Krueger

For The Post-Crescent  
USA TODAY NETWORK-Wisconsin

Our mother, Ellen Kort, used to tell those who struggled for words to settle their minds in a peaceful place and "just listen." We had the good fortune as children to watch her put this into practice as she took pride in raising a family, helping others and addressing adversity in her life. She positively influenced the lives of so many across our community, state and country.

We grew up in Appleton and spent the majority of our lives here.

We have always been proud of our community and proud to call Appleton home. We remember the day in 2016 when our family found out that the Appleton Common Council had set aside a small parcel of greenspace along Appleton's historic riverfront to honor our mother. This place was to be named Ellen Kort Peace Park. It was a day that perfectly reflected a life well-lived by someone who selflessly gave so much to others.

To our mother, it did not matter if you were a kindergartner learning to write or an accomplished poet with multiple poems published in the New Yorker — she encouraged you, and put you at the center of her world. She was a "builder" of relationships among people of diverse backgrounds who appreciated the unique value and contributions of each individual.

This "building" philosophy is why we believe Oscar Boldt chose our mother to take the lead role on the written word portions of the book he commissioned, entitled "The Art of

See PEACE PARK, Page 2A



Kort

## WE Energies customers will see 10.9% rate boost

Karl Ebert

Milwaukee Journal Sentinel  
USA TODAY NETWORK - WISCONSIN

We Energies residential customers will see a double digit increase in their electric bills, and a smaller increase in their natural gas bills next year.

The Public Service Commission of Wisconsin on Thursday agreed to a rate increase of 10.9% for residential electric

service. The panel adopted a staff recommendation that was lower than the 13% increase sought by We Energies, but higher than the amount sought by consumer advocates.

The decision resolves an unusually contentious rate case that focused on energy affordability, particularly for thousands of low-income households that are struggling with inflation.

We Energies estimates the increase

will add about \$11 to the average residential customer's monthly electric bill.

The exact amount of the increase remains an estimate. Staff is reviewing the rate and other decisions made by commissioners that reduced the utility's operating costs to prepare a final rate schedule for each class of customer. The PSC will finalize rates at a future meeting.

The rate case drew the attention of

community activists who staged rallies and filed objections in the arcane rate-setting process.

Consumer ire ignited in October when the utility — after reaching a partial settlement agreement with many of its largest customers and some, but not all, of the environmental and consumer advocates that had signed on as

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# ND Paper

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second paper machine will make the same switch. Both machines will be fed by a new, on-site recycling facility.

On a rainy day in mid-October, a construction crew worked to finish the structure by the end of the year. When its completed, the facility will daily provide more than 1,550 short tons — or 3.1 million pounds — of Old Corrugated Container pulp for the mill.

This is all part of ND Paper's 100-year vision for Biron, said Caleb Coder, vice president and general manager of the facility.

"The mill has had a long history of changing and adapting to different market conditions at this site," with support from the community, he said. Given that commitment and these new investments, "there's no reason we can't be here 100 years from today, 100 years from tomorrow."

## A tale of two mills separated by just 5 miles

The Biron facility was aligned with the Wisconsin Rapids paper mill — located less than 5 miles away across the Wisconsin River — for about 100 years before their paths diverged. While Biron began making paper in 1896, Wisconsin Rapids began production in 1904 and added Biron to its Consolidated Water Power and Paper Co. portfolio in 1911.

In 2000, Consolidated sold to Helsinki-based Stora Enso Oyj, who then sold to Ohio-based NewPage Corp. in 2007. The company filed for Chapter 11 protection in 2011 and announced plans to sell the company to Verso in 2014. Before that merger was finalized, though, NewPage sold its mills in Biron and Rumford, Maine, to Catalyst Paper Holdings, who then sold Biron to Nine Dragons Paper in 2018 for \$175 million.

Meanwhile, Verso filed for bankruptcy protection in 2016 and sold its mills in Jay, Maine, and Stevens Point to Pixelle Specialty Solutions in February 2020. By that June, Verso announced it would indefinitely idle its paper mills in Wisconsin Rapids and Duluth, Minnesota. The company cited a decline in demand for graphic paper due to the COVID-19 pandemic, as retail, sports, entertainment and tourism



Rolls of paper awaiting shipment are seen in a warehouse on Oct. 12 at the ND Paper mill in Biron.

PHOTOS BY TORK MASON/USA TODAY NETWORK-WISCONSIN

industries reduced their use of print advertising during the state's safer-at-home orders.

While there has been interest over the last few years in purchasing or helping restart the Wisconsin Rapids mill, Verso ultimately merged with BillerudKorsnäs AB, a Swedish company that now goes by Billerud. Workers are still on-site, continuing converting operations that began at the Rapids mill in 1974. According to Billerud's website, about 110 employees remain at the Wisconsin Rapids location, converting rolls of paper produced at Michigan mills into folio and digital sheet paper. As of September, Billerud had no news to share about its plans for the Wisconsin Rapids mill.

As the union leader for the both of these facilities, and as someone who's worked at the Biron mill for 27 years — and whose dad work at the Rapids mill

for 48 years — Tim Pavlik has witnessed these different trajectories.

"On the day that I received the notification that the Rapids mill was shutting down, it hit me like a ton of bricks," said Pavlik, president of United Steelworkers Local 2-94. "I never expected the Rapids facility to have that happen."

There wasn't always the same certainty at Biron, he said, as owners changed hands during a decline in the lightweight coating industry.

"We all figured that mill wasn't going to last forever," Pavlik said. "That was the feeling of many of the employees."

But now, with the investments that have been made, Pavlik has a different mindset.

"I feel confident that this is a place that I can retire from," he said. "And I feel confident I can tell people that are new hires that if you choose to make a career out of working at this mill, that you'll

have the same opportunities I do ... if that's what you choose."

## ND Paper says it's 'here to stay'

Just as he's seen changes under different owners, Pavlik has watched the paper industry evolve over the years.

After World War II, a lot of the paper that was produced in Biron was used in Newsweek and Time magazines, according to a book written about the mill's history. Later, when Pavlik was hired, magazines and catalogs were still "very prevalent," he said.

But over time, the lightweight coated market has been in "a steady state of decline," while packaging has shown "all sorts of signs of growth," said Coder. The reason, he said, is "because our buying habits have changed." People don't get

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# ND Paper

Continued from Page 3

five or six magazines a month in the mail anymore, or order as many products through catalogs. Instead, they buy items online, which arrive in boxes at their homes.

ND Paper cited this growth and shift toward e-commerce, as well as consumer demand for more sustainable products, for why the company decided to make changes at Biron. A little over a year ago, ND Packaging — ND Paper's sister company — also opened a 350,000-square-foot corrugated packaging plant almost 200 miles southeast of Biron in Sturtevant, which employs 114 people.

Containerboard production reached record levels in the U.S. in 2021. That has started to level out, though, as demand has decreased and more facilities across the country started making these packaging materials, increasing the capacity in the market. Still, ND Paper sees much greater growth in packaging over the coated papers that Biron previously made, said Jay Capron, company spokesperson. And ND Paper plans to use what Biron produces to compete in North American markets, which, he said, "are large and expected to grow over the long term."

Both ND Paper and ND Packaging are U.S. subsidiaries of Nine Dragons Paper (Holdings) Ltd., which is based out of Hong Kong. Zhang Yin, who is "known in China as the 'Queen of Trash,'" built the company "by producing corrugated board out of recycling scrap," according to a 2020 New York Times article about how Nine Dragons became the "unexpected savior" of a shuttered paper mill in Old Town, Maine.

In 2018, China restricted the import of American recycling scrap, which led some companies, including Nine Dragons, to invest in U.S. plants, the Associated Press reported. In addition to Biron and Old Town, ND Paper has facilities in Rumford, Maine, and Fairmont, West Virginia. ND Paper, itself, is headquartered in Oak Terrace, Illinois, and Nine Dragons also has facilities in Asia.

Earlier this year, Nine Dragons issued a warning, saying its profits may not meet what was expected for the fiscal year, partly due to the rising cost of raw materials.



Vice President and General Manager Caleb Coder holds pulped waste paper on Oct. 12 at the ND Paper mill in Biron. TORK MASON/USA TODAY NETWORK-WISCONSIN

"Like many other manufacturing operations around the world, our Biron mill and other U.S. facilities have been challenged by the recent and excessive inflationary pressures impacting our input costs," Capron said. But, he said, "we remain firmly committed to our 100-year vision and the long-term success of our U.S. operations."

In 2019, the Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation announced it would give ND Paper \$1.7 million in tax credits over three years to support the expansions at the Biron division, which were expected to create 27 new mill jobs.

The WEDC and ND Paper confirmed this month that the company had met the requirements it needed for the tax credit. Capron added that ND Paper is "grateful" for this support, which "was critical to support the pulper installation and grade conversion of our B25 paper machine, greatly improving the long-term sustainability of the paper mill."

More than 300 people work at the Biron facility, and the company is currently hiring for multiple positions. ND Paper is also partnering with Marathon Health to open a health clinic at the mill early next year, which will provide similar care as a walk-in clinic, including immunizations, lab work and physicals, among other services. The clinic will be free for some employees and their dependents, Capron said.

of going to a landfill, he said, these boxes and paper are being reused at their facility.

The bales are put into a pulper that uses an agitator to stir it all up. Unusable material is sorted out, and the rest goes through machines to make brown paper used for kraft (brown paper) bags, mailers and corrugated (cardboard) boxes.

The Biron facility makes the liner, which is the smooth outer portion of a box, as well as the corrugated medium, which is the wavy piece between the liners, Coder said. These are sent to the Sturtevant facility and other customers, he said.

In general, paper machines "operate under the principle that you put water in and take water out at the right time," Coder said. But with the recent conversions at Biron, there was an adjustment period, he said, as employees changed over the machines and started using a "completely different fiber."

First, a team worked to convert the B25 machine in 2021, and they did "a phenomenal job," Pavlik said.

"My hat's off ... to those guys for all the hard work and hours they put in to get that machine up and running during COVID," he said. "That was something that wasn't easy."

Coder hopes that the lessons they learned with the B25 machine will help as the B26 machine gets switched over in the second quarter of 2023. Still, he said, it's a big job.

Coder is excited to see these changes and the new products coming out of Biron, but the "heart of this mill and the heart of this story," he said, is the people who work there each day that make it possible.

"We've been through so much consolidation and different companies purchasing us," Pavlik said. But, "I believe the future of our mill is in our own hands. We work hard, and we put some extra time in sometimes, and we're going to be successful, like the heydays of Consolidated Papers."

Pavlik added, "I'm glad that [ND Paper] did come to town, and I'm glad they brought the Biron mill, and I'm glad they're proving that there is life in the paper industry going forward."

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**Shortly after buying the facility in 2018, ND Paper announced it would invest \$189 million in the Biron mill. During the COVID-19 pandemic, employees converted one of the paper machines from making lightweight coated paper for magazines and catalogs to producing packaging grade paper for cardboard boxes.**

With all these updates, Capron said that ND Paper wants employees and the community to know, "We're here," and "we're here to stay."

**The people, who are the 'heart of the mill,' work to convert machines**

Standing inside the Biron mill last month, Coder watched as employees moved large bales of recycled items, including a beer box, a magazine, a crossword puzzle and a Count Chocula box. Coder likes to tell his workers, "Be proud of what you're leaving behind." Instead

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