

# TOUR

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The oil boom in North Dakota opened up a new market for Builders Choice products and caused the company to start looking at new facility options in South Dakota.

"A lot of our customers are Houston-based, and they asked us to start building our products in North Dakota," Larson told Johnson. "We started looking in North Dakota to set up an operation and realized there weren't any employees left up there because they've gone to work in the oil business, so we started looking through South Dakota, knowing that we were looking to South Dakota, knowing that this is a good business state."

"Your main job is to build housing?" Johnson asked.

"Yes, we do dormitory and commercial-type of buildings," Larson replied, showing the senator photos of various projects completed by the company in recent years. Builders Choice constructs tough, yet easy-to-move building components designed to serve the needs of people working in some of the toughest weather conditions in North America.

Completed projects include "camp" housing at North Slope and Spy Island, AK; teacher housing in Hooper Bay, AK, a state courthouse in Unalaska, AK; and a hotel and kitchen facilities for an oilfield in Deadhorse, AK.

"We do a mixture of oil-related business (in Alaska), and we do a lot of work for the state," Larson said. "We've done schools, we've done housing for the state, we've done stores. A lot of Alaska is rural, and resources for our employees in that setting would be very limited."

Builders Choice instead manufactures its buildings in modular units indoors in a factory setting. Those units are shipped to their final destination, rather than being built on-site, exposed to the harsh elements.

Larson, who lives in Anchorage, AK, noted that he had just received a text from

his wife. "This is a great time of the year (in Alaska)," he joked. "According to her text, we just got 90 inches of snow in our back yard."

He told Johnson that the assistance his company received from the VCDC helped make the decision to locate in Vermillion an easy one.

"Steve (Howe) has been wonderful," Larson said. "He's helped us out tremendously, and this building is great for us."

The plant floor was filled Tuesday morning with several building units all in different stages of construction. As the Johnsons moved from the front of the factory to its back, they came upon one unit a bit closer to being completed than what they had just viewed a few moments earlier.

Larson said Builders Choice and its employees took occupancy of the Vermillion location in early October, and training preceded any manufacturing.

"Really, when you do an assembly line process like this, it's a good training methodology," he told Johnson, "to get started with an empty floor. When you start the line, you first start training the floor guys, and you start doing walls, and you're training the walls guys. Then you start doing electrical, and you bring those guys in."

"So, they've really been working now since probably Nov. 15 - that's when the first nail went into something. We're really excited; being from the Midwest, we immediately could find good people here to hire who wanted to work," Larson said.

The goal of the Vermillion plant is to turn out one modular building each day.

"Traditionally, what we're looking for here is for these guys to turn out one module of production per day," Larson said. He told Johnson that there are approximately 12 work stations from one end of the manufacturing floor to the other, "so it's about that many days that you are moving from that end (the beginning) of the line to the other end of the line."

"As you get started, is it an assembly line model that

follow?" Johnson asked.

"That's what we're trying to teach, and that's probably the hardest thing to teach," Larson said. "Right now, the training hurdle is for guys who are talented electricians, carpenters and plumbers to do things in a little bit different way than they are used to doing it in the field."

Depending on the skill range of the workers, Builders Choice employees are paid from \$10 to \$25 per hour.

"That's good money in South Dakota," Johnson said.

In a meeting with local media following the tour, Johnson said he was impressed with everything he had just witnessed.

"Builders Choice brings a lot of jobs to South Dakota," he said, commenting on the current business climate in the state. "All of South Dakota is doing very well. We have low unemployment, and the economy is growing rapidly. We've come out of the recession well, and we're open for business."

Johnson added that the addition of new employment opportunities in Vermillion, Sioux Falls and other communities are attracting South Dakotans who have migrated away from the state.

"We are seeing South Dakotans returning home from across the nation," he said. "These jobs will pay between \$10 and \$25 per hour, and that's good pay in South Dakota. It's good that we have skilled workers in South Dakota and from across the country."

The senator noted that private industry, not the government, creates jobs. "But the government can help by providing infrastructure and job training," Johnson said. "That's the most important aspect of the situation that the government can do. The government needs to cooperate with the private sector to create jobs."

He hopes that The White House said legislation proposed last fall by President Barack Obama and Congressional leaders calling for the development of a national infrastructure bank receive approval on Capitol Hill.

"It's frustrating to me that



The new addition being constructed by Masaba will allow employees to sandblast the products they build indoors, in a controlled environment, before they are painted. Currently, the blasting of equipment before it's painted occurs outdoors.

(Photo by David Lias)

there is too much partisanship in Washington these days, and we can't get people to cooperate," Johnson said, "but, that too will hopefully go away."

"We're just appreciative that the senator is here," Larson said as Johnson continued to talk to reporters following the tour. "It is fun to

be in his back yard, and it's fun to be able to show him something that's happening in his hometown. And, for us, it's just great to be recognized and to know that even though we're in business just to be in business, to be recognized by the senator is just terrific."

The politics in Alaska and in South Dakota are very

similar, he said.

"And having access to your politicians and to your elected officials is really encouraging," Larson said. "They know who you are, and what you do, and so if you have the opportunity that you need to talk to them about something, it's not like you need to go through five layers of people."

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