

Airbus reaching new heights in Fort Erie

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Dwayne Charette is director of global supply chain and manufacturing for Airbus in Fort Erie. (Kris Dube/Special to the Review)

Business is soaring at Airbus, a global helicopter manufacturer that currently employs 240 people at its Fort Erie plant on Gilmore Road.

Built in 1984 as Eurocopter and later renamed Airbus Helicopters in 2014, the company has locations across Canada, Europe and the U.S., producing more than 10 models of aircraft for the public and parapublic, in addition to its military variants.

In Fort Erie, there are eight helicopter models that come through Airbus for completion or be assembled with hundreds of various carbon-fibre parts that are manufactured in Fort Erie.

Securing contracts with new customers, including governments from around the world, has a lot to do with the influx of manufacturing taking place at the Fort Erie site, according to Dwayne Charette, global supply chain and manufacturing director for Airbus.

“We’re very excited about it,” he said.

“It’s a result of our product mix and more demand.”

Adapting to a fluctuation in the helicopter manufacturing industry, Airbus branched out to making parts for the automotive sector in 2013 and continues to do so today.

Along with attracting new buyers, this has helped keep the workforce at Airbus busy the past few years.

The helicopter business is very “cyclical” and the ups and downs are rather noticeable.

“With these contracts being secured, it brings a lot more volume into the shop,” said Charette.

“Part of the challenge is how do we keep our workforce when the demand goes down,” he said.

When aircraft go through the completion stage at the Fort Erie facility, customization is a crucial factor — providing a product that its operators are familiar with — especially when it isn’t the first vessel they have purchased from the company.

“With a lot of our customers, they’re looking for commonality in their fleet,” he said.

The use of carbon-fibre materials is integral in the industry, allowing production of a product that isn’t too heavy but is still strong and durable.

“Everything is about saving weight with composite,” he said.

About 50 per cent of the pieces made in Fort Erie are shipped to Airbus facilities in the U.S. or Europe to reach the next steps of assembling completed machines.

There are four areas of expertise under the Airbus agenda in Fort Erie — aircraft completions, manufacturing, repair and overhaul, along with aftermarket support.

The local plant is 12,420 square metres, with about 9,000 square metres of the building devoted to workspace and the rest used for offices.

A message that has been delivered to the local city council by Fort Erie Economic Development and Tourism Corp. for many years is that there are plenty of employment opportunities in town, but not enough qualified bodies to fill available positions — a sentiment Charette said he doesn’t disagree with.

“When you look at what we do and the type of products we have, nobody goes to school for composite manufacturing,” he said.

Airbus does offer a thorough training regimen for all its new hires and Charette said resumes are always welcome.

“There are jobs and we’re constantly recruiting,” he said.

About 15 completed helicopters are delivered to customers annually out of Fort Erie and 110 are purchased around the world each year.

Hundreds of parts are manufactured at the Fort Erie location, most of them heading to another plant’s assembly line for the next steps in the completion process.

The local site is the headquarters for Canadian customers.

In 2016, the company adjusted its name and became Airbus, no longer Airbus Helicopters.