

Brilliance of Kodak

Lightwave traces its shine back to brilliance at Kodak

Firm's work can be found in medical, defense industries

Matthew Daneman

Staff writer

(March 2, 2008) — Lightwave Enterprises Inc. on Mt. Read Boulevard is almost within throwing distance of Kodak Park.

And the Rochester optics company shares more than geography with Eastman Kodak Co., as its founder and a number of its workers also came from the storied photo and imaging Fortune 500 firm.

President and Chief Executive Rexford R. Fisher Sr. spent 22 years at Kodak — 15 of them before leaving in 1989 to start one small business, and then returning to Kodak in 1992 for another seven years after he sold that business. He started Lightwave in 2000.

"I'm an entrepreneur at heart," Fisher said. "I love the challenge of a small business. I was just anxious to get back to the small business environment."

Lightwave does precision molding of plastic optics, lens design, thin film coating and optical engineering. Its customers range from the defense industry to makers of medical diagnostic equipment.

"Kodak, Xerox, they end up being customers," Fisher said.

The economic development organization Greater Rochester Enterprise long has tagged optics and imaging as one of the Rochester region's key strengths and potential growth areas. One reason is that when optics was a new industry a generation or two ago, Rochester was in the center of a "perfect storm" of optics-based giants like Kodak and Xerox Corp. And in response to that, the University of Rochester brought in researchers from around the world, said GRE Managing Director Mark Peterson.

"You put that together and you get a long, long play of an industry sector where Rochester has national prominence,"

Peterson said.

Lightwave employs 26 people, and for one special project in 2007 it briefly expanded to 50. Several of its workers are people laid off from Kodak , Fisher said.

The work Lightwave does represents areas that Kodak used to do more frequently.

"I understand they can't be everything to everyone," Fisher said. "Component manufacturing is probably not of interest to a multibillion-dollar company. It's creating an opportunity for unique companies to emerge that have a niche."

Lightwave is profitable, Fisher said, though he declined to provide specific figures. Fully 70 percent of Lightwave's products are shipped internationally, often for use as components in other products.

While the company manufactures components, there are increased opportunities in systems manufacturing — providing assembled collections of components at the heart of some other product.

Fisher said that in addition to operating a profitable business, he is trying to run one based on Biblical principles. Bible verses adorn part of the company's Web site and Lightwave donates money to Hagar International, a Swiss foundation that particularly focuses on destitute women and children in Cambodia.

"We try to live our faith," Fisher said. "We try our best to make our people feel they are of real value. We have to be a viable business, not a charity. Hopefully we're as charitable as possible."

MDANEMAN@DemocratandChronicle.com