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Manchin visits Blenko factory

Gov. Joe Manchin and a West Virginia University dentistry student have pledged support to keep the kilns fired at the 110-year-old Blenko Glass Co. in Milton.

Gov. Joe Manchin visited the hand-blown glass factory Thursday taking a tour and talking with the company's CEO, William Blenko Jr., on how to help the company deal with the exorbitant natural gas costs.

As heating bills have risen for natural gas users throughout the country, Blenko's have skyrocketed. In November and December 2004, the factory was paying for about \$110,000 worth of natural gas a month to fuel its kilns, Blenko management said. The company has cut production almost in half in the past year and reduced that monthly natural gas cost to \$50,000, Blenko said.

"Whatever restructuring is needed, we are willing to help out," Manchin said after meeting with Blenko Thursday. "They are looking at the whole process. There is a demand for the product. That is not a problem. What is the opportunity to supply the product? What raw materials are out there? Is there modern technology to make them more competitive?"

Manchin on Thursday became the first governor to visit Blenko since Gov. Hulett Smith dedicated the Visitor's Center at Blenko in 1966. Manchin came at the urging of West Virginia University dentistry student and Charleston native Hillary Homburg. Homburg, 21, started a campaign this summer to get community and political support for the glass factory.

Instead of going to Europe this summer on a stipend she received as a 2002 WVU Foundation scholar, Homburg used her \$2,500 stipend to conduct surveys, interviews and write congressional and state leaders to visit and support Blenko. She has even tried to get Oprah Winfrey to endorse Blenko on her show or in her magazine. "Europe would still be there," Homburg said, "but I wasn't sure Blenko would still be. Blenko is having tough times."

Homburg grew up around glass making with a dad whose hobby was making stained glass. Some of her earliest memories are of making trips to Blenko Glass to gather colored glass for her father's passion. "I have been a glass hound since the age of 3," Homburg said. "I remember getting glass from Blenko at a really early age. I just have a passion. I want to have that for my children. For me, part of my growing up was going to Blenko, seeing the glass made. When people visited me or I traveled, I would take the handmade glass signed by Richard Blenko to show people. I would hate to think about losing that. To me, Blenko Glass is as much a part of West Virginia as West Virginia University football."

Homburg said she has pondered how to bring awareness about Blenko for about six years after she learned on one of her frequent visits to the factory that some furnaces were shut down to save on the cost of gas.

Homburg traveled this summer to malls in Columbus, Pittsburgh and Morgantown and surveyed 200 people about their views of Blenko Glass. She also interviewed collectors and former workers/designers at Blenko. She learned in her survey most young people under the age of 35 know of Blenko through the PBS documentaries and fundraisers Blenko Glass president Richard Blenko has worked on. People over age 35 know of Blenko through the old advertisements the company would pay for in Life magazine and other national publications. Many people think Blenko should advertise more, Homburg said.

"Most don't think Blenko is still around because they don't advertise as much," Homburg said.

Homburg said the goal of her Blenko Project is the creation of a focus group of people to serve as activists for Blenko who would coordinate an effort to get public, political and financial support for the factory.

William Blenko wouldn't specify what type of restructuring the plant would need. The plant will seek more fuel saving measures, he said. "It is a constant struggle with the fuel prices," William Blenko said. "We have reduced that by half by cutting production in half. We put in some fuel saving measures. We survive by having a good design, quality and name recognition."

Longtime Blenko employees say they see many reasons to be optimistic. Orders this year have risen, said David Osburn, shop supervisor and glass blower at Blenko Glass.

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Osburn has worked at the company for 32 years.

Competition of cheaper glass varieties from Mexico and overseas as well as the gas prices have tightened the belt in recent years at Blenko, Osburn said. The plant, however, has improved efficiency and insulation to cut down on costs. The plant also combats the tough times with its variety of products, he said. Blenko can produce more than 1,200 different colors of glass.

"It has been a rough last couple of years, but hopefully we will get out of the rough spot," Osburn said.

Serious Blenko collectors such as Tammy Kosla want to see a bright horizon for Blenko Glass. Kosla, president of the Blenko Collectors Society, has more than 1,300 pieces of Blenko glassware in her Lake Zurich, Ill., home. She began collecting Blenko glassware in 1999 after her mother died and she took possession of her Blenko vase. Her collection took off from there, she said.

Kosla was on hand Thursday for Manchin's visit. Kosla gives a simple explanation for her adoration of the colored glassware made in Milton. "It is the color, the shape, and, to me, the most important thing, it is American made," Kosla said.

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