

Verbij excited about windmills

By Brian Roebke, Editor

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Lucas Verbij is a fourth generation millwright in his family, with the company dating back to 1868.

With all of that experience, Little Chute Windmill, Inc. has selected the perfect person to work with on their proposed windmill.

Verbij was in Little Chute Oct. 21-22 to look at the feasibility of moving the proposed Little Chute Windmill from a downtown location to Island Park.

“That is a concern because the windmill needs wind and the wind comes over town and the wind doesn’t go down suddenly because there’s a valley over there,” he said.

Verbij said that the windmill needs to be raised to catch the wind by adding extra floors under the balcony.

There were many discussions about the shape of the windmill and its place on the island during the two days of meetings between Verbij and the committee. “It’s a big island, so you can put it anywhere,” he said. “Of course, you have the canal and the locks over there and maybe the windmill can be connected to that a little bit so that you can place the windmill close to the dike and build it into the dike over there.”

Verbij said they had a healthy exchange of information and he will make some notes and work on some ideas when he returns to the Netherlands after making a trip to San Francisco. “I also want to make more pictures and maybe make a pre-picture of how the windmill will look at this location so you can make a picture of how the windmill will look at this location,” he said.

Robin Dekker, executive director of Little Chute Windmill, Inc., said no decisions have been made, and building the

windmill on the island remains a possibility. The design may need to be changed, and it could be done without additional cost.

“There are eight-panel windmills and there are round windmills,” Verbij said. “That’s a possibility but I think it’s much more complicated to make ... windmills like it are built by brick and a combination of brick and concrete is very complicated and beside that, we have to raise the balcony so high, the round shape is less beautiful I think than an octagon shape.”

Windmills have been a constant in Verbij’s life.

At one time there were many windmills in Holland and they were built in a very small geographic location. As the years went on, they became less essential. Windmills were still used after World War II, but the importance of the windmill declined. Eventually, many windmills were destroyed but the government later decided all windmills were a national treasure and could no longer be torn down.

“From that period, my father’s company got more projects in the restoration and maintaining windmills, and the company also grew a little bit,” he said.

The city where his company is located is in the midst of many windmills. “That’s the main reason we still exist,” he said. “Otherwise, we would have to search for another business.”

He said it became exciting when his company started to work abroad. Now, they do work not only in The Netherlands, but Japan and the United States.

Verbij was never pushed into the family business, but he studied and liked construction. When he finished school, he started working for a construction company and enjoyed the job.

“Then one day my father said to me, ‘when you want to take over the company, then you have to come home now, otherwise I will sell the company.’ Then I decided to do that and I started working for my father,” Verbij said.

Now, 20 years later, he’s still running the thriving company. In 1994, Verbij was invited to San Francisco to make a restoration plan for a windmill there. Six years later, he went back again and the project started.

A person from Pella, Iowa, came to him in 1997 to request his presence in that town to build a windmill.

He was invited to go to Holland, Mich. for a maintenance plan and supply new sails for its windmill and on the same trip, went to Fabyan, Illinois to see a windmill that was in very bad shape. That windmill reopened in 2005 after \$1 million in work and then came the Holland contract.

Al Van Lith from Little Chute was the first person to contact Verbij and he believes this is the fifth time he’s been to Little Chute.

“Sometimes it takes time before a project starts,” he said.

It took eight years to get a contract in San Francisco. His father once spent 13 years working on a project before he got a contract. Plans for one windmill currently under construction in The Netherlands were made 60 years ago.

“Comparatively, we aren’t really taking that long,” Dekker said.

Verbij said new construction and renovations are both exciting, but seeing the eyes of people who see a windmill’s sails move for the first time because of his work is particularly satisfying.

He said it’s more special to see a windmill built or fixed in the United States, since there are so few of them.

In Fabyan, “the first day we released the brake and the windmill started again, it didn’t turn for 40 or 50 years, many cars were honking their horns waving to us because they never saw the windmill turning,” Verbij said.

At the opening ceremony, many old people wanted a picture taken with him because of their satisfaction with his work. “Actually, it’s a very beautiful part of my work,” he said. “One guy said I kissed my first girlfriend at this windmill and another guy said I married at this windmill and another one said we were always sledding here in the wintertime, so all these people had so many memories of that windmill and it couldn’t even turn.”

Completion of projects is always bittersweet for Verbij.

“There is a happy and a sad moment always,” he said. “The sad part is the project is over, you don’t see these people you work with, you won’t see them so much anymore, but the happiness is that the windmill is turning.”

The wooden part of the windmill that Verbij builds is the top part and it will be manufactured in The Netherlands, shipped here, and assembled in about three months. The lower part will be of masonry construction and done locally.

“We assemble everything on the ground and one day there will be a big crane which lifts everything together ... and in one day you build a whole windmill,” he said.

