

Bucks firm helps Amtrak get back on track

By Crissa Shoemaker DeBree Staff writer | Posted: Friday, May 22, 2015 3:30 am

Building the huge structures that hold the power lines running along and above railroad tracks can take at least six months from start to finish, from design and engineering to final installation.

Bucks County steel fabricator PennFab Inc. designed, constructed and had two of them installed in less than three days.

The herculean effort by the company and its employees helped Amtrak reopen its Northeast Corridor line Monday, less than a week after the deadly derailment of a New York-bound train shortly after it left 30th Street Station in Philadelphia. Eight people died and more than 200 were injured.

It was an unprecedented response to an unspeakable tragedy. “It was a horrible tragedy,” said PennFab founder and president Mike Mabin Sr. “Hopefully, there’s a lot to be learned from it. But the sooner we got it back up, the sooner people could get back to their lives.”

Officials continue to piece together why Amtrak 188 was going twice the posted 50 mph speed limit on May 12 when it entered a sharp curve in the Frankford section of the city. The investigation, so far, has centered on engineer Brandon Bostian and what he was doing before the derailment.

Mabin was just settling in for the night at his Newtown Township home when he heard about the derailment. He sent a message to Amtrak officials, pledging the full resources of his company to help.

“I didn’t know the extent of it at the time,” he said. “I knew it was going to be a catastrophic event.”



Sparks fly as Jeff McKay, a welder at PennFab, touches up welds at the plant in Falls Township on Tuesday May 19, 2015. McKay was one of a team of employees who worked round the clock to fabricate a structure to get the Amtrak Northeast Corridor line up and running again after the derailment last week.

Two days later, PennFab and Amtrak officials were meeting at 30th Street Station to discuss rebuilding two steel catenary structures that hold the power lines above the track and had been ripped out of their foundations by the derailment.

In an email, Amtrak spokesman Craig Schulz said PennFab was one of nearly two dozen vendors and suppliers who supported the reconstruction effort at the site of the derailment.

“Amtrak thanks the many individuals and businesses — including PennFab — for their contributions in helping us return the Northeast Corridor to full service Monday morning,” he said. “The NEC is a vital economic engine for our nation, which is why hundreds of men and women — from Amtrak, its supply chain partners and elsewhere — worked around the clock to restore service as quickly and safely as possible.

“Amtrak greatly appreciates the tremendous support and assistance in the aftermath of last week’s tragic derailment and asks for everyone’s continued thoughts and prayers for those on the train and the families who lost loved ones.”

PennFab is no stranger to the railroad business.

It built the Cornwells Heights and Fort Washington train stations, and it expects to build the new Levittown train station. It’s in the midst of a project to construct catenary structures for 14 miles of high-speed rail line. It’s done steel work on the Burlington-Bristol Bridge and at Lincoln Financial Field and Disney’s Mission: Space ride.

“We’re really, really good at this,” said Mabin, a Coast Guard veteran who founded PennFab in 1983 with just \$2,500 in his pocket.

About two years ago, the company invested \$2 million in new, high-tech equipment for the Falls fabrication plant where it makes the largest of its structures. The investment, Mabin said, was one of the reasons the company could complete the Amtrak project so quickly.

But even more important were PennFab’s 48 employees, almost all of whom volunteered to work nonstop to get the work done.

“It’s much bigger than ourselves,” said Pete Tesno, a 13-year employee and supervisor at PennFab Morrisville, which is how the company refers to its Falls plant. “It’s an awesome feeling. There’s a lot of pride.”

PennFab left its initial meeting with Amtrak with 1930s-era drawings of the original structures. By 4:30 p.m., PennFab officials were back at the company’s Bensalem headquarters, getting to work finalizing the designs. By midnight, they were done.

By 3 a.m. on May 15, senior project manager Steve Krotzer was on his way to Falls with files to program the machines that would be put to work. Less than a half hour later, vice president Mike Mabin Jr., Mike Sr.'s son, had steel on the equipment so they could start drilling the first holes.

Krotzer said PennFab's vendors were on call to meet the company's needs. While they initially hoped to use existing structures that were already in production, they weren't the right fit. That meant everything had to be built from scratch.

Welding the huge steel poles to their base is a job that can itself take 12 hours to complete, Mabin Sr. said. But employees performed the work in groups; when one stepped away, there was someone waiting to take his place in line to weld or drill.

"We knew how important it was," Krotzer said.

Employees slept in their cars. Family members brought in food. No one questioned how much they'd be paid — in fact, the company doesn't even have a purchase order from Amtrak, and is still tallying the cost of labor and parts for the project, Mabin Sr. said.

By 4 p.m. Friday — 24 hours after PennFab's first meeting with Amtrak officials — the poles were complete.

While it's heavy, laborious work, it's also very precise. If a hole is even a millimeter misaligned, the structure wouldn't go together, Mabin Jr. said. Fixing it would delay the project by hours.

"When it was getting installed and went in seamlessly, I wanted to clap," Mabin Jr. said. "It was amazing. We went back on Sunday to see it all complete, and it was just amazing to see what we had gotten done in a short period."

In a statement, U.S. Rep. Mike Fitzpatrick, R-8, Middletown, praised the company for its efforts.

"Last week's Amtrak derailment hit close to home for the thousands in Bucks County who rely on transit for transportation and work," he said. "That's why it's fitting those stepping up to get this vital service back on-line are also from our community. PennFab's around-the-clock work to design, build and install critical portions of Amtrak's rail system is a testament to the efficiency and effectiveness of its employees and operation, but also a prime example of Bucks County businesses stepping up when the pressure is on."

It was back to business at PennFab last week. Steel needed to be cut, projects needed to be completed. But there was an overwhelming sense of pride that remained.

"We knew we were on sacred ground," Mabin Sr. said. "We were honored to do it."