

We will continue to send updates as they occur, including local newspaper articles and any TV News interviews. Below was in the Bloomington, Indiana, Herald Times Newspaper, 9/29/11:

Fire forces Helmsburg sock factory to seek new location

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[click photos to advance \(3 photos\)](#)



Helmsburg sock factory fire Sept. 10 in Brown County. Keith Rhoades | Reporter-Times

HELMSBURG — Working with insurance adjusters in the aftermath of [a Sept. 10 fire that destroyed 100 knitting machines and her sock manufacturing plant in rural Brown County](#), Sharon Rivenbark realized she will have to rebuild her For Bare Feet [business](#) elsewhere.

Someplace with a dependable water system that has enough pressure to operate overhead sprinklers. Someplace with better roads for delivery [trucks](#). Someplace with around-the-clock firefighters on station, ready to respond in an emergency.

She is considering sites in Martinsville, Edinburgh and Bloomington.

“The fire brought it all to the forefront,” Rivenbark said Thursday evening after a long day of meetings with representatives from her insurance company. “We were constructing a new 28,000-square-foot building, and

even after that we would be short on space, and there's nowhere to grow. We are hemmed in on this property, surrounded by ravines."

"The fire marshal said we absolutely have to have sprinklers if we stay here, and even though Brown County has good water pressure for residential customers, for a manufacturing facility, you have to have constant high pressure. We would need to put in our own water tower."

About 100 volunteer firefighters from a dozen departments responded to the sock factory blaze and were able to contain it to one side of the facility because of fire walls. But the insurance experts asked her to consider what would happen if a fire broke in the winter.

"They do not like the idea of a volunteer fire department, and pointed out to me that if there was snow and ice, they could not get here fast," she said. "With this kind of a loss, in the millions of dollars, they are not willing to go along with that."

Then Rivenbark started thinking about how suppliers have to send several small delivery trucks instead of one big one in order to access her factory. Finished products, from socks to a new line of rain boots, leave the same way because semi trucks cannot navigate in and out.

"There are so many decisions to make and so much going on," she said. "But we need to decide what to do now, so we can get back to work."

Getting back to work is crucial. Rivenbark's family business, started with one antique loom more than 20 years ago, has expanded in a big way in recent months. Besides providing products from wrist bands to socks for major league athletic organizations in the United States, among them the NFL, For Bare Feet has landed similar contracts in Europe, including one with the Manchester United soccer club.

"We've just opened an [office](#) in London," she said. "Our business had a 48 percent increase last month and we had anticipated that until the end of the year."

Her initial plan for a temporary location became a search for a new home.

Days after the fire, Rivenbark called her 150 employees to a meeting and told them the news: They had to leave Helmsburg behind. But she polled them, and said three-fourths chose Martinsville as their preferred site for a new plant. "The majority of our employees live in the northern part of Brown County, and there are a lot from Martinsville, too, and even from Greenwood. One person on our sales staff drives in from Noblesville."

The company's insurance is paying all of For Bare Feet's workers their full salary until the factory reopens.

She said the [new site](#) "will come down to who can get us in first." Her son-in-law traveled to Spain to meet with the manufacturer that supplies the business with knitting machines and arranged to have 30 shipped now, with another five or 10 arriving each month until the factory is back to full speed.

All that's needed is a place to put them.

“It’s really difficult, considering leaving,” Rivenbark said. “It’s so ironic, and bittersweet, that us being so successful is one of the main reasons we cannot remain in Brown County. But I have to look forward and make the company grow. I have 11 grandkids who might want to carry this on, and there are a lot of kids growing up who will need jobs. We cannot grow the company while staying here.”

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