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By Michael Bradwell

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CHARLEROI - Six years ago, Walter Keller had narrowed his choice of sites for a headquarters for his start-up Nokomis Inc. to three places: Pittsburgh, Baltimore and Charleroi.

The company makes electromagnetic devices for the defense industry and deploys them in places like Iraq and Afghanistan to detect, disable or gather information about adversaries. It wanted to remain close to its contacts in Washington, D.C., but also wanted to keep costs down.

Keller, 39, a physicist who on Monday announced an expansion at his offices and labs at 310 Fifth St. and hinted that more growth could be on the way, said it was numbers that made his choice of Charleroi one he doesn't regret.

"When we ran the numbers, there was just no comparison" to the other cities, he said, noting that setting up shop in the Mon Valley has enabled him to recruit some of the best and brightest engineers and technicians with doctorate and master's degrees from nearby schools like Carnegie Mellon University, University of Pittsburgh, Penn State and West Virginia University.

"We're only four hours from D.C.," he said. "It kind of surprises me that more companies have not explored (Charleroi)."

Today, Nokomis, which also has offices in Pittsburgh and Toledo, Ohio, employs 25 in the Charleroi headquarters - up from just four employees four years ago - doing classified work for the defense department. Keller, who said Nokomis products find applications in both ground and unmanned aircraft operations of the military, showed prototypes of a new propeller-type detection antenna that can be fitted

onto aircraft.

During a tour of the company's facilities, which recently expanded to fill the second half of a former furniture store the company purchased several years ago, guides showed several labs for testing antenna characteristics and large padded chambers that can isolate noise to give more accurate test results for its antennas. The antennas are used, among other things, to detect IEDs, or improvised explosive devices, being used by the enemy to kill or maim soldiers.

Work on the company's projects received a boost Monday when U.S. Rep. John Murtha, D-Johnstown, visited to announce three contracts totaling nearly \$14 million.

"Protecting our service members from the threat of IEDs has been an absolute priority of mine," said Murtha, who chairs the House appropriations subcommittee on defense. "The technology being developed by Nokomis will save lives."

Keller said later that Nokomis has purchased two other buildings in downtown Charleroi and said the company hopes to continue its expansion within the next year. While the military remains the company's primary customer, Keller noted that police departments in Pittsburgh and Jefferson Hills Borough have used Nokomis products to check for the presence of bombs and other devices, creating a secondary market for the company.

"Charleroi is a wonderful headquarters for Nokomis, and I'm personally humbled to work day-to-day with one of the premiere technology development teams in the defense industry. The community, location, access and local talent pool are a significant asset to the company that we've been able to leverage over the last several years."