

# NY Town Defends Remington Factory Amid Gun Ban

Michael Hill, Associated Press

ILION, N.Y. (AP) — The big brick Remington gun factory pieces together military-style rifles in a state that has just banned their sale after a string of mass shootings led to a national outcry over civilian ownership of them.

Residents of Ilion see the issue far differently: The gun factory is a major local employer and a source of pride for almost two centuries.

As Mayor John Stephens put it, "Remington is Ilion. Ilion is Remington."

Little wonder that residents in this blue-collar stretch of the Mohawk Valley are defending Remington after state lawmakers banned the sale of semi-automatic rifles like the Bushmaster weapon made there. The move came after the weapon was linked to gunmen in the deadly Connecticut school shooting and in the Christmas Eve slayings of two firefighters in western New York.

Remington employee Tom Bradle said don't blame the guns in mass shootings, blame the shooters.

"It's the person that pulls the trigger. I don't care what kind of gun it is," Bradle said as he walked back to the factory from lunch break on a chilly, gray day recently.

Chad Delmedico, who works on Remington's Model 700 bolt-action rifle, said it more simply: "We have a bum rap."

Remington has been intertwined with Ilion since shortly after Eliphalet Remington crafted a flintlock rifle on his father's forge in 1816. Even the elementary school shares the company's name. Company officials did not respond to calls seeking comment, but locals say the factory employs about 1,200 people and produces Bushmaster, Marlin and H&R products.

Parts of the Remington Arms Co. factory, with its imposing four-story front of brick and old-style, multi-paned windows, date back to the days when upstate New York was a manufacturing powerhouse. But factory jobs have become rarer in the string of modest towns along the Mohawk River, and Ilion, with about 8,000 residents, depends heavily on Remington.

Stephens, the mayor, was disgusted by the news last month of 20 first-graders and six adults killed by a gunman at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Conn. But he is critical of the New York state law approved last week banning certain semi-automatic rifles and large-capacity magazines and calling for background checks on ammunition purchases, among other measures. He dismisses the idea that there's

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an emotional link between Newtown and Ilion.

"Are people disappointed and distraught?" Stephens asked. "Do they feel bad and are they sad? Absolutely! Absolutely! I would never wish that on anyone, never. But as far as an emotional attachment between us and them, I don't see it."

Stephens voiced a sentiment heard frequently in this largely conservative area: New York's law and the sweeping gun regulation package proposed recently by President Barack Obama are wrongheaded.

The New York law, starting when Gov. Andrew Cuomo signed it Jan. 15, defined as illegal assault weapons semi-automatic rifles that accept detachable magazines and have one additional military-style feature such as a pistol grip, flash suppressor or bayonet mount. The old law required two such features.

At the State Bowling Center next to the Remington factory, Rod Brown said the weapon that the Newtown gunman used could easily have been a Smith & Wesson or a Browning instead of a Bushmaster model.

Kelley Holmes-Morton in her salon, Heads-R-Turning, said she is a National Rifle Association member who believes gun makers are not to blame. And Betty Watkins said as she pumped gas that the Second Amendment, about people's right to bear arms, is being "pushed around and misused."

Robbi Breit at the Sellers Avenue consignment shop seemed more conflicted than others in Ilion but still feels that closing Remington won't end gun violence.

"I cried my heart out" after Sandy Hook, she said. "I'm torn between both sides. But you can get another job. You can't get another kid."

Bushmaster is owned by Freedom Group Inc., the largest firearms maker in the U.S., which has its headquarters on Remington Drive outside the neighboring small towns of Madison and Mayodan, N.C.

No guns or ammunition are manufactured there. Most people around know the 43,000-square-foot building near the high school and the Walmart as the home of Remington Arms, which moved to the site in the mid-1990s, and not the weapons conglomerate Freedom Group has become, said Mayodan Town Manager Michael Brandt.

"They're not big contributors to the community like a typical large company would be in an area," Brandt said. "This is where they're located, but we don't really see much of them."

Word that Freedom Group is for sale and changes are looming has generated little local concern in an area where surviving textile producers and a Miller-Coors brewery are bigger employers, said Sharon Chirichella, who runs a temporary staffing agency and is an officer with the local chamber of commerce.

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That contrasts with Ilion, where the concern among people is the future of Remington. The company had said last March it could leave New York if the state went ahead with a move to add unique identifying information on spent bullet casings. That proposal is off the table, but people in town wonder where things stand in the wake of the new state law, which does not affect Remington's ability to manufacture military-style weapons.

"If I'm an executive at Remington, what's my attitude going to be toward the state that bans one of the premier products that I produce?" local Assemblyman Marc Butler asked.

Obama's gun control proposal added more uncertainty. Jamie Rudwall, who has worked at the plant since 1995 and is president of the United Mine Workers of America Local 717, said he expected the gun business to increase in the short term amid new regulatory proposals, but he worries about jobs in Ilion long term.

"We've been here almost 200 years," he said. "I hope to be here another 200."

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