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Richmond Gear expanding in Liberty

Plant expects to add 30 to 40 jobs

By Anna Simon

LIBERTY — A \$2.8 million expansion that will add 30-40 jobs at the RICHMOND Gear plant between Liberty and Norris was good news for plant workers and Pickens County residents Thursday.

"We are very excited about the expansion. It means more jobs and more room," said Hattie Rhone, a purchasing clerk who has worked 30 years for the manufacturer of automotive and boat performance products, including ring and pinion sets for the automotive racing industry.

The Liberty woman feels fortunate because many of her friends lost jobs at other area plants that have shut down. The expansion "means some Pickens County residents will have opportunities to work at our facility," she said.

Pickens County has been hard hit by plant closings in recent years, particularly in the textile industry as jobs have moved overseas.

Tommy Galloway, a machinist from Six Mile, lost his job when a West Union plant closed two years ago. Some part-time jobs helped pay the bills and then five weeks ago RICHMOND Gear hired him to run a grinding machine.

He's comforted that the company is growing at a time when so many are cutting back.

Gary Justice, vice president and general manager at the plant, plans to hire machinists late in the fourth quarter and is looking for engineers now.

Mike Wilson, of Pickens, a forklift operator at the plant for 18 years, said workers are elated.

"It's actually happened and it took a while to believe because we've been crowded for so long," he said.

The 40-year-old plant started as a 20,000-square-foot facility and is now 185,000-square-feet with the new 60,000-square-foot addition, Justice said.

It has continually grown and evolved from its start as a satellite of Ohio Gear. Today it employs about 180 people and parent company Regal Beloit is making it a core facility, which will transform it from somewhat of a secret in Pickens County into a showcase.

The expansion provides space for the recent addition of new product lines, Velvet Drive Transmissions and POWERTRAX Traction Systems plus room to grow, Justice said. In addition there will be a new test lab where engineers can study transmission performance and longevity.

"We can make more products and win more races and power more boats and all the things we do for a living," Justice said.

Expansion of the company that's built a Daytona 500-winning transmission comes at a time when nearby Clemson University is building its International Center for Automotive Research in Greenville that economic development leaders hope will make the Upstate a research hub for automotive and motor sports industries.

Justice said he plans to talk with Clemson to explore ways to work together.

"With this test facility, that will be exciting," Justice said. "The horsepower keeps going up and up and up."