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## Pickens hoping Reliable just the beginning

By Sara Harvey

LIBERTY — The Pickens Commerce Park welcomed its first tenant Tuesday, and the promise of 350 jobs, but local leaders promise that it won't be the last for the county struggling to overcome waves of manufacturing layoffs.

The Reliable Automatic Sprinkler Company broke ground on its 305,000-square-foot plant on Smith Grove Road off of U.S. 123. Construction begins in earnest in mid May and 350 people should be at work in the plant by late 2005 or early 2006.

"I'm sure people will happy, there have been so many jobs lost and plants closed down," said Lynn Williams, 34, a Liberty resident. "A lot of the people I know are waiting for things to start picking up, for the economy to get better."

The company designs, manufactures and distributes fire sprinklers and system components worldwide, according to Clare Morris of the state Department of Commerce. It will move the majority of its operation from Westchester County, NY.

"These 350 new jobs, this \$30 million investment, will make a remarkable difference in a lot of families' lives," said Gov. Mark Sanford, who attended Tuesday's groundbreaking.

The county is still vigorously recruiting new industry, said Ray Farley, director of Alliance Pickens, the county's economic development initiative.

"It would be nice if these were cookie-cutter processes," Farley said. "But we've jumped right back into the briar patch, trying to find other products immediately."

Farley said he's visited Michigan to recruit auto-related industries, will travel to California to court the medical-device industry and visits Germany in June.

To assist in recruitment, Sanford invited Reliable's visiting vice presidents to dinner last May 28 — Sanford's birthday. Michael Fee figured they wouldn't be visiting the Governor's Mansion that trip but, "sure enough, about an hour later," Ray Farley said, 'Believe it or not, but the governor wants you on that day,' " Fee said. "That was just super."

F.J. Fee, president of Reliable, an 86-year-old, third generation company, praised Pickens County and the state for incentives that made the move possible and for its quality workforce. The company considered locations in Virginia and North Carolina during its three-year search.

"This is a most significant event in the history of our company," said F.J. Fee. "It was such a coordinated effort among all of the parties, that we sought no other place."

Economic development reaches to the state and federal levels, U.S. Congressman Gresham Barrett said.

"One of the things we're doing is working to allow people to keep their hard-earned money to stimulate growth in the private sector," Barrett said. "Also, offering packages at the federal and state levels. It's a big day for Pickens and South Carolina, to have a family business to move and remain in the U.S.A."

The construction represents a \$30 million investment in Pickens County. The building, nearly three football fields long, will house Reliable's manufacturing, research and development and administrative operations.

"I just cannot believe that this is a happening today," Pickens County Councilman Norman Langston said. "It just goes to your heart."

Troy Brooks, 37, grew up in Liberty and is now moving back from Simpsonville with his family. While some are fearful that the small town will grow beyond recognition, "I think any kind of jobs would be good anywhere we can get them these days."

Pickens' unemployment rate in March was 5.7 percent, matching the rate for the Greenville metropolitan area, said Stephen Gardner with the state Unemployment Securities Commission.

Reliable announced its intention to build on the 56-acre site in February.

"We're grateful for this industry that will transpose these red hills into jobs for our people," said County Councilman Roy Collins.

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