Anderson in running to land 1,000 jobs

Incentives designed to lure factory to make paper products

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Anderson County is in a race to win a new plant that could bring 1,000 jobs to a county where the unemployment rate is higher than the state average and headed in the wrong direction.

South Carolina officials, hoping to best Georgia in a contest for the jobs, have quietly put together an incentives package that will include a special income tax break if lawmakers agree, said state Rep. Dan Cooper, who has been part of the recruiting effort.

The plant "would be a big boost in the arm for the Upstate if we can get it," said Cooper, a Piedmont Republican who chairs the House Ways and Means Committee.

It is more personal for Jennifer O'Sullivan, an unemployed mother of two from the Landrum area who said she has been hunting a job without success for four months.

"You have to have gas to find one, and if you're not bringing in an income, then you don't have the gas," O'Sullivan said. She would "most definitely" be interested in one of the jobs if they land in Anderson.

Cooper wouldn't name the company planning the facility or comment on a published report that said a division of First Quality Enterprise Inc. is planning a 2 million-square-foot paper products mill in either Anderson or Augusta, Ga.

First Quality announced in July that it was looking at two undisclosed locations to make 70,000 tons of paper tissue and paper towels a year. The company said at the time that it expected the plant to be operating in 2011.

Moshe Oppenheim, spokesman at First Quality's headquarters in Great Neck, N.Y., said the company is privately held and doesn't give out information about its plans.

Cooper said he has met with executives from the company he had in mind when he sponsored the incentives legislation and expects it to make a deci-

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sion soon on where to put the plant. He said the plant would employ up to 1,000 people and cost more than $500 million.

South Carolina is competing with Georgia for the corporate investment, Cooper said, though he didn't know the exact site under consideration in Georgia.

The legislation would allow up to $5 million of income tax paid by shareholders to be used for publicly owned infrastructure at a new corporate facility. The tax break would apply only to shareholders of firms that spend more than $500 million at a single site in South Carolina and create at least 400 new jobs.

The bill also would allow the "fee-in-lieu" property tax break commonly granted to companies in exchange for new facilities to last as long as 40 years, provided local officials find a "substantial public benefit."

Robert Scott, president of the South Carolina Forestry Association, said the kind of plant First Quality announced in July wouldn't emit the odor typically associated with a paper mill because it wouldn't process raw timber to make paper pulp but would rather process paper pulp to make consumer products.

The plant is the "type of green industry we seek for South Carolina," Scott said, adding he sees no reason why anyone would object to it.

First Quality's products include Panda brand toilet paper and Plenty brand paper towels.

First Quality also sells its consumer products under other private-label brands and makes nonwoven fabric used in various products, such as surgical gowns, protective apparel used in industry, filters and bedding.

The company was founded by the Damaghi family in 1988 and does business internationally, according to its Web site.

Anderson County's unemployment rate in December was 13.4 percent, nearly a percentage point higher than its November rate of 12.5 percent, according to the latest data from the state Employment Security Commission.

The state average was 12.6 percent.