Anderson plant is 'a game changer'

Manufacturer plans to hire 1,000

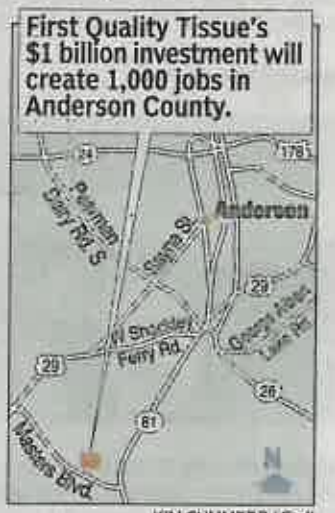
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ANDERSON — First Quality Tissue's $1 billion investment in Anderson County will create 1,000 jobs in an area of high unemployment, is the largest industrial investment in county history and in the Upstate since BMW, and resurrects an abandoned manufacturing site where Maerine Paul-Scott, her dad and uncles worked for many years.

"We all called each other when we heard the news. We were just ecstatic," Paul-Scott said. "A lot of people still don't have jobs from when the plant closed."

The site, formerly Shaw Industries and before that BASF, which employed 1,200 people when Paul-Scott worked there, is on Masters Boulevard south

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KIM SUMMERS / Staff



PAUL BROWN

Nadir Damaghi, foreground, one of the paper plant's owners, attends Friday's announcement in Anderson.

PLANT

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of Anderson in an area hit hard by textile job losses in recent years.

"We have a lot of people experienced in production work who are out of jobs," said Jason Watson, program coordinator for the state Department of Social Services' Supplemental Nutritional Assistance program. "A company as substantial as this will have a great effect on the community as a whole."

Hiring for the Anderson County facility is expected to begin in the third quarter of this year, with an anticipated 200 positions at that time. People interested in applying will be able to find more information in coming months at www.sctechjobs.com.

Production jobs at the new plant will pay more than $17 an hour, said Kara Borie, a spokeswoman for the state Commerce Department, and the plant will have engineering positions that will pay significantly more.

The project, dubbed "Project Big Water," consumed state, county and local officials who worked through many nights, weekends and holidays for months and had to overcome what Gov. Mark Sanford called "technical difficulties based on past ownership of the property" to land what is a big fish in a county with 12.5 percent unemployment.

"That's what I call economic development," said Eddie Moore, vice chairman of Anderson County Council, who represents the district where the site is located. "A lot of people worked very hard."

A "state-of-the-art" tissue manufacturing facility to be built on the site will involve up to four phases of construction, with the first paper machine expected to begin operation in the third quarter of 2011, said Frank Ludovina, who represented First Quality at a formal announcement Friday.

A skilled labor pool, "exceptional" work ethic, willingness to put together needed infrastructure, and a "pro-business" environment were keys in the Great Neck, N.Y., company's decision to locate in Anderson County, Ludovina said.

Gov. Mark Sanford cited the privately held, family-owned company as an "inspirational" small business success story, beginning with six employees 20 years ago and now employing more than 3,000 people.

The $1 billion investment is the largest single investment in Anderson County history and the largest in the Upstate since BMW, Sanford said.

U.S. Sen. Lindsey Graham called it "a game changer" that will create jobs for unemployed residents and new graduates, but the Seneca Republican also reminded the overflow audience at the Anderson Civic Center that "a lot of people even after this announcement are hurting."

Creation of private-sector jobs is "the best thing" that can be done for the economy, Graham said.

State Sen. Billy O'Dell, R-Ware Shoals, called the team effort to bring the

company to the Upstate "a wonderful model of what we can do."

State Rep. Dan Cooper, R-Piedmont, who visited the company's New York plant, said, "I've never seen a more pristine and clean facility."

No members of the low-profile family that owns First Quality Tissue spoke at the public announcement, but the eldest son, Kambiz Damaghi, addressed dignitaries at a private luncheon afterward.

He said the family-owned company is very flexible and wants to work with everyone provided they aren't asked to compromise their principles and integrity, Carol Burdette, immediate past board president of Advance South Carolina, which contributed $250,000 toward site improvements, told *The Greenville News*.

Burdette, who also is chief professional officer of the United Way of Anderson County, said the company is reported to be a "good United Way partner" in New York and she anticipates it will be a good corporate citizen here as well.

The news also bodes well for the education community at a time when "every school district in Anderson County has taken an absolute beating," said Randy Price, a member of the Anderson County Board of Education. The company's investment and new jobs will spur home and other purchases that ultimately produce needed tax revenue to educate children, Price said.

Private schools will benefit as well, said Ellie Elzerman, owner and teacher at the Clemson Montessori School.

"It's always wonderful to have new business in the community. It helps everyone," Elzerman said. Bringing in new industry creates "more interest in the entire education system, both public and private and that can only help the children."

The news brought praise and also questions from residents like Shari Prevost, of Central, who doesn't want any unintended consequences to harm the quality of life in the Upstate.

"It sounds great," Prevost said, "but it needs to be green and progressive."

Robert Scott, president of the South Carolina Forestry Association, told *The Greenville News* that plants that process pulp rather than raw timber to make consumer products don't emit the odor typically associated with a paper mill.

First Quality "is a green company, with a low carbon footprint," and is "a responsive, active member of the communities in which they are located, providing academic loans through local educational institutions and supporting local charities like the United Way," according to press statements provided Friday.

Company products include adult incontinence and feminine hygiene products, baby wipes and disposable diapers, adult washcloths and consumer paper products such as paper towels and bath tissue. Other non-woven fabrics can be used in medical products such as surgical gowns and drapes and for industrial uses such as packaging, protective apparel and filtration.