

Bridgestone job briefing causes buzz

Today's announcement to be 'major'

By **Kristy Eppley Rupon**
The State

Bridgestone Americas Inc. is expected to announce today that it will bring thousands of jobs to the Midlands.

The company said Tuesday that it will make a "major economic development" announcement at 2:30 p.m. at its plant in Aiken County. A company spokesman would not say how many jobs are expected.

But Ike McLeese, president and chief executive officer of the Greater Columbia Chamber of Commerce, said he has heard the job announcement will be "bigger than Boeing." His organization is not involved in the announcement.

Boeing recently opened a 787 Dreamliner plant in North Charleston, pledging to bring 3,800 jobs to the state when it announced that plant two years ago. That was the largest economic development announcement in state history.

An announcement of that magnitude would be a huge shot in the arm for a state struggling with an 11.1 percent unemployment rate, tied for fourth-highest in the nation.

Bridgestone has 932 employees in Aiken Coun-

ty who make passenger and light-truck tires at its plant in Graniteville. The plant opened in 1998.

Bridgestone said in July that it would invest \$135 million to expand its Aiken County plant by 266,000 square feet, creating 122 full-time and contractor jobs. That facility is expected to open in mid-2013 and will produce 4,750 tires a day.

Gov. Nikki Haley's office would not comment on the scope of the project that will be announced today, although her office sent out a notification Tuesday that she would attend today's announcement in Aiken along with Bridgestone Americas chief executive and president Gary Garfield and other company executives.

Politicians and economic development officials contacted Tuesday would not comment on whether the Aiken announcement is the much-rumored "Project Soccer."

South Carolina has been vying for that unidentified project - along with North Carolina and Louisiana - in recent months, according to published reports.

That project, reported to be a tire plant, is expected to bring 1,500 jobs to one of the three states, the reports said.