Economic development rolling along in Pickens County

BY GREG OLIVER
THE JOURNAL

If you see Alliance Pickens executive director Ray Farley these days, you're bound to see a smile on his face and a bounce in his step.

Why the glee? Simple. Economic development in Pickens County is alive and well, as evidenced by two major announcements that have taken place within the span of less than a month.

First, Reliable Automatic Sprinkler Company, which was the first industry to make its home in the Pickens County Commerce Park in 2006, recently announced an expansion of 150,000 square feet to the existing facility. The expansion will bring a capital investment of $23.1 million and 100 new jobs to Pickens County.

"They are bursting apart at the seams," said Pickens County Council chairperson Jennifer Willis when announcing the expansion at a news conference late last month.

Reliable manufactures automatic fire sprinklers and is a major distributor of sprinkler system components with operations across the United States as well as in England, Germany, Singapore, China, Australia and the United Arab Emirates.

The project is expected to take 12-14 months to complete.

In early May, Zero Connect, a custom cable assembly manufacturer and supplier of off-the-shelf fiber and copper products for voice, data and video applications, annnounced they were establishing operations in the county. The $1.3 million investment will create 72 new jobs.

Farley said Zero Connect would occupy a building that is an existing facility, once used as a warehouse manufacturer for the former Precision Kayak. The 18,000-square-foot facility is expected to open sometime in July or August.

"Some projects take up to five years to come to fruition but Zero Connect came down the pike very fast," Farley said. "From our initial discussions with them to the announcement, it was probably a four-month period."

Once the company began looking around the Upstate area, Farley said they focused solely on Pickens County. The Alliance Pickens Executive Director said in early May he feels these recent economic development announcements – the first in three years – will lead to more in the future.

"Pickens County is well positioned to receive more manufacturing investment due to a couple of things – the volume and velocity of skilled workers or service providers with their minds and hands who are going into the Pickens County workforce and, two, our cost structure here for manufacturing is very attractive when you compare it to the rest of the Southeast."

The 310-acre commerce park features St. Jude Medical, KeyMark, Inc., Tri-Tech USA, substations for Duke Energy and Blue Ridge Electric Cooperative and AT&T digital fiber switch. Alliance Pickens also opened its new headquarters at the park last year and, overall, there are nearly 1,200 workers combined who are employed through the park's business and industries.

Farley said Alliance Pickens has also developed the Scholar Technician initiative to encourage students to consider careers in Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM) and create a highly-skilled, technically trained workforce to support existing companies and attract top-notch manufacturing firms to Pickens County. The Pickens County Career and Technology Center provides students with hands-on career training in a variety of areas — including Machine Tool Technology and Mechatronics Integrated Technologies — enabling many to obtain full-time employment with industrial firms in the county following graduation from high school.