BUSINESS

Electric car maker looks at Upstate

ICAR, autos cluster get attention of third builder of high-tech vehicles

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Porteon Electric Vehicles Inc., an electric car company from Portland, Ore., is considering South Carolina as a location for its first plant, the company's chief executive said.

Porteon CEO Ken Montler said Clemson University's International Center for Automotive Research in Greenville is part of the reason his company is interested in South Carolina.

"I like ICAR a lot," Montler said.

He said the proposed plant could employ between 250 and 500 people in the first three years, but his four-year-old, 10-employee company is still trying to line up financing for it.

Two other electric vehicle makers — Proterra LLC of Golden, Colo, and CT&T Co. Ltd. of South Korea — have said they're considering the Upstate as a possible location for new facilities.

Only Proterra, however, has talked with Greenville County Council about tax breaks in exchange for corporate investment, said Bob Taylor, chairman of the council's Finance Committee.

Taylor said county officials have met numerous times with Proterra executives, and "all the meetings have been very positive."

U.S. Rep. Bob Inglis of Greenville said he's met with executives from all three companies.

"I'm very excited because I believe the road to economic recovery and the road to energy independence are one and the same, and that road leads through South Carolina," Inglis said.

Inglis said the firms are eyeing South Carolina because of ICAR and the state's base of auto parts companies, most of which are in the Upstate to be close to the BMW Manufacturing Co. plant.

"Hats off to BMW because they created an automotive cluster for us," Inglis said.

Executives with all three companies said their firms are pursuing loans and grants from the federal government to spur electric vehicle use.

Proterra's plant would make all-electric and hybrid-electric buses and could employ 500 people in three years, the company has said. Joshua Goldman, Proterra's director of business development, said a decision on the plant's location will be made later this month.

Curt Westlake, a senior marketing director for CT&T, said the Korean company is "on the verge" of deciding where to put its U.S. headquarters and research and design center and an assembly facility. He said CT&T is considering one site in the Upstate and one in the Lowcountry as well as sites in Georgia.