Farley: Pickens Co. 'well positioned' for future manufacturing investment

BY GREG OLIVER
THE JOURNAL

PICKENS COUNTY — Alliance Pickens executive director Ray Farley has witnessed the influx of economic development at the Pickens County Commerce Park. But like all economic officials, Farley has also seen time go by when no announcements of new industry or expansions occurred.

Of course, Farley prefers to see economic development activity. Last week, the Alliance Pickens head had the opportunity to announce the latest positive economic news with the expansion of Reliable Automatic Sprinkler Co. Inc. The operations expansion is a $23.1 million capital investment that will create 100 jobs and bring Reliable's total facility to 452,000 square feet.

Farley said he feels the first major economic development since TaylorMade Golf Company relocated from Westminster to the Pickens County Commerce Park three years ago will be a harbinger of more to come.

"We do have reason for optimism," Farley said. "Pickens County is very 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."

Farley has enjoyed his share of economic development announcements during his tenure. The 310-acre Pickens County Commerce Park itself 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 moved its headquarters to a newly built facility at the park last year, and there are nearly 1,200 workers combined who are employed through the park's business and industries.

When Farley works on attracting new business and industry to Pickens County, he can perhaps bring along Reliable president Kevin Fee. Fee said he was sold on South Carolina, and especially the Pickens County area, when it came to relocating the family-owned business from New York.

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Fee initially planned to consider either North Carolina or Virginia for relocation. But, at the insistence of Reliable senior vice president of manufacturing Bill Kirkpatrick, he decided to visit the Palmetto State.

"We were so far along in our in-depth analysis for either Virginia or North Carolina that we were ready to make a decision between the two," Fee said. "Bill tells me, 'You've got to come to South Carolina. I came and felt the same way. This was a gem; this was a jewel. The state jumped in with Pickens County and put the package together. We want to be here."

Not only was Fee captivated by the beauty of the state and the friendly manner in which his family was greeted, but he also experienced his first Clemson football game.

In 2003, Fee, a Boston College fan, said he and his brothers attended the Clemson-Boston College game.

"That day at Clemson University was a great day," Fee said. "We got to go on the field, and my two brothers were trying to kick field goals, and one blew out a knee and the other had a hamstring pull."

Farley remembers the day well.

"It was like watching a bunch of 18-year-olds doing down-and-outs and buttonhooks," Farley said. "But that was the day we came together and united as a team — Pickens County and Reliable — and it continues to this day. This is the proof in the pudding, as 75 percent of Reliable's employees are from Pickens County."

Reliable marked the first tenant in the Pickens County Commerce Park and the first of many economic development announcements to take place over the past dozen or so years.

As a symbol of what Reliable has meant to the economic fabric of Pickens County as well as to symbolically commemorate how far along the county has come in economic development, Farley presented Fee with a Clemson football signed by Pickens County Council.

While he and his family are excited to continue their commitment to Pickens County, Fee said the company also wants to assist the county in attracting additional businesses and industries in the future.

"We can be one of your greatest referrals, and anytime you need to give a reference on the site to prospective Pickens County industries, please call us because we're a strong believer in Pickens County," Fee said. "We want to do everything we can to continue to grow and develop that partnership. We want to be there for you as well."

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Alliance Pickens executive director Ray Farley, right president of Reliable Automatic Sprinkler Co. Inc., to announce the second expansion of Reliable.