Itron: We're 'committed' to Oconee

Despite layoffs company looks to future

BY MIKAYLA KREUZBERGER
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WEST UNION — It hasn't been the greatest year on record at Itron's West Union facility, after 300 employees were left without jobs as September came to an end.

In fact, with Covidien's recent announcement that its Seneca plant is closing entirely within the year, the Oconee community has been left a little unnerved.

Yet the Itron facility, which kicked off its 50th anniversary Friday with a celebration at the facility (more on page A7), is still a vital asset to the Oconee community, according to General Manager of Operations Mike Higgins.

"We still employ 650 people, and we are still considered a very large employer," Higgins said. "Reductions were made as a result of the end of an aggressive business cycle at Itron, but I'd say we are back to a normal size. Now we are the right size for business operations and business opportunities."

Despite the layoffs, Higgins said the company is "very committed to its business and to its facility.

"We are stable," he said.

Known as Sangamo Electric when it opened in 1962, the company employed 600 people and made electric meters for domestic, commercial and industrial uses.

Sangamo was bought by Schlumberger in 1975.

Higgins, who has been in the utility industry for his entire career, said the biggest change he has seen in utility development is the onset of technology and a drive toward operational management.

When Itron purchased Schlumberger in 2004, the company introduced new ways to support operational and support functions for utility software, Higgins said.

"People are moving toward being more energy and environmentally conscience," Higgins said. "And they see great value in information that helps them make smart energy decisions."

Oconee's facility invests, on average, 10 percent of its revenue on state-of-the art technologies, according to the company's brochure.

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From 2007 to 2010, Itron invested $20 million at the Oconee plant, which facilitated the production of a record number of meters with smart metering technology in 2010, according to an earlier report in The Journal.

Higgins said he attributes the success of the company's achievements to its outstanding work force.

"I think that from my perspective, we have an excellent work force available to us in the Upstate. We have great people in this area, and we have always been very proud of our business, our employees and their achievements."

Higgins also credited the company's achievements to the partnerships with educational facilities, including Tri-County Technical College, Greenville Technical College, Clemson University and the University of South Carolina.

Itron offers onsite classes for college credit and will reimburse tuition costs for employees pursuing courses at area colleges.

Higgins said his company strives to improve operational efficiencies, and is open to new partnership opportunities that may come into the area, including Norfolk Southern's interest in an unloading station near West Union's downtown.

Mike Higgins said "We are watching how that situation evolves and will take the opportunity to work with that development if it presents itself," he said.

He said the company's goal is to "provide good quality, good paying jobs in the community for another 50 years."

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