Pickens County welcomes latest economic announcement

Existing company expanding into state-of-the-art $5M facility

BY GREG OLIVER
THE JOURNAL

PICKENS COUNTY — When Michigan-based JR Automation Technologies LLC, a global leader in custom automation solutions, agreed to establish operations in Pickens County in 2011, the deal was sealed with a basket of peaches.

History repeated itself Monday at a special called news conference at Alliance Pickens headquarters in Liberty during the official announcement of the company's $5 million investment in a new 50,000-square-foot state-of-the-art facility in the Pickens County Commerce Park.

Before a standing-room-only audience, Alliance Pickens executive director Ray Farley presented JR Automation Technologies CEO Bryan Jones with a basket containing the fruit.

"During the 2011 recruitment, we made a pledge to JR that when you're ready to sink your roots deeper in the county, we'll strive to provide that for you," Farley said. "Eight to nine months ago, I got the call that said, 'Dude, we're ready.'"

JR Automation Technologies, which was established in 1980, provides custom automated equipment and services to customers in a variety of industries, including automotive, aerospace,

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medical device, pharmaceutical, food processing, construction and more.

The company has 850 employees across eight locations, with services including offering automation solutions, integrating technologies and processes ranging from welding to laser applications to metal and plastic processing.

Since its arrival in Pickens County five years ago, the company has been leasing a 21,000-square-foot facility in Pickens. But the new 50,000-square-foot facility will represent Phase I of what has a future expansion capability of 150,000 square feet.

The expansion will not only retain its existing workforce of 32 employees, but also add 56 employees with the pay for all ranging from $20-$48 per hour.

"This is another wonderful day in Pickens County," Pickens County Council chairwoman Jennifer Willis said. "They were courteous and worked to make sure this relationship and partnership with Pickens County would work. We're looking forward to seeing them grow and succeed for years to come. These jobs will enable people to have a great quality of life, raise a family and become outstanding citizens of Pickens County."

JR Automation Technologies CEO Brian Jones said that while a number of locations were sought, the thing that most impressed him and other officials was Pickens County's dedication to technology. The School District of Pickens County led the drive by teaching electrical, engineering, mechatronic and programming skills to students at the Career and Technology Center.

In recent years, the Scholar Technician initiative has encouraged students to pursue STEM-manufacturing knowledge and skill set development. A workforce not only originating from the Career and Technology Center, but also through Tri-County Technical College and Clemson University, were all factors in the company's decision to stay and grow in Pickens County.

"If we can get more young adults incorporated into this, instead of graduating from college in all kinds of debt, they can graduate with all kinds of opportunities in front of them," Jones said. "There can be kids driving in $50,000 trucks that are paid for."

Pickens County Career and Technology Center executive director Ken Hitchcock said he is excited for the center to be a part of the economic development taking place in the county.

"(Alliance Pickens is)

nuge supporters of us and allow us to be a part of recruiting industry into the area," Hitchcock said. "We take a lot of pride in the fact our kids have a leg up. With these higher technical skills and the expansion of what's out there with these high-tech companies now, we're just excited there's another opportunity for them."

State Sen. Thomas Alexander, who represents a portion of Pickens County in addition to Oconee County, said JR Automation Technologies' decision to stay in the county and expand "is a great team effort."

"I think it speaks volumes that they are making their permanent home here in Pickens County, and their potential for continued growth demonstrates their dependence on the county and those that are being educated to be successful with JR Automation Technologies," Alexander said. "I congratulate them on their success so far and for their future success. This is about the people of Pickens County."

The expansion of JR Automation Technologies, previously called Project Dallas prior to Monday's official announcement, marks the latest in a series of economic development announcements for Pickens County.

During this year alone, Reliable Automatic Sprinkler Company, the first industry to locate in the commerce park in 2006, announced an expansion of 150,000 square feet to its existing facility, with a capital investment of $23 million and 100 new jobs.

That was followed by Zero Connect, a custom cable assembly manufacturer and supplier of off-the-shelf fiber and copper products for voice, data and video applications, occupying an existing 18,000 square-foot facility on Kayaker Way in Easley to the tune of a $1.3 million investment and creation of 72 new jobs.

In addition, era-contact, based in Bretton, Germany, and among the world market leaders in electrical railway couplings, announced that Pickens County would serve as its North American headquarters.

The company will be located between U.S. Highway 123 and Reliable Automatic Sprinkler Co. and bring in more than $3 million in investment, as well as 45 new jobs.

Farley expects more economic development announcements to be forthcoming in the near future.

"Hopefully, it won't be too much longer we'll be able to get together again like this," Farley said.

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Alliance Pickens executive director Ray Farley points to the conceptual drawing of the new JR Automation Technologies facility to be constructed in the Pickens County Commerce Park. Construction of the 50,000-square-foot facility is expected to begin late this year and open for