

Caterpillar recruited for Brunswick-Columbus site

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Caterpillar Inc. is being recruited by North Carolina to build a plant in an industrial park straddling the Brunswick-Columbus County line, according to officials with knowledge of the discussions between Gov. Beverly Perdue and company executives.

But Caterpillar said Tuesday the company doesn't "respond to rumors or speculation about any specific initiative."

"We are a very large company, (more than 125,000 employees) and have operations in dozens of states and dozens of countries," spokesman Jim Dugan said in a statement. "As such, at any given time, we have a wide range of business initiatives at various stages of maturity that are under consideration."

The plant that has spurred interstate competition is a facility Caterpillar is moving back from Japan, said John H. Boyd, a principal with The Boyd Co. Inc., a site selection consulting firm in Princeton, N.J.

The plant would be Caterpillar's "global source" for small-track tractors and mini-hydraulic excavators for the Americas, according to Southern Business & Development magazine.

"The new facility will also export partially assembled mini-excavators to Europe," according to the magazine.

Caterpillar already operates in North Carolina. Most notably, it opened an 850,000-square-foot plant in Winston-Salem last fall, where it makes axles for mining trucks. Employment there is expected to reach 500 by 2014.

Brunswick County lost out last fall in a battle for a Continental Tire plant and potentially more than 1,000 jobs. South Carolina won the competition as North Carolina's incentive package fell short.

The loss led to heated political finger-pointing between Republicans and Democrats in Raleigh.

State Rep. Danny McComas, R-New Hanover, said Tuesday that a decision by the still-undisclosed company, which would reportedly bring 1,100 jobs, could come in the next two weeks.

He also confirmed that the site is not the same site that Continental Tire had considered but instead a separate tract across U.S. 74/76. Called the International Logistics Park of North Carolina, the 1,200-acre site qualifies for economic grants and incentives based on Columbus County's relatively low economic ranking.

McComas also confirmed that two other states are in negotiations with the company.

"Georgia and South Carolina are being very aggressive about this," he said.

Jim Bradshaw, executive director of the Brunswick Economic Development Commission, would not comment on the project Tuesday.

He did say, though, that the International Logistics Park has electric service from Progress Energy, water service from Columbus County and sewer from Brunswick County.

Natural gas service from Piedmont Natural Gas is 7,500 feet away, he added.

Officials with the company were in North Carolina Monday to meet with Perdue in Raleigh. The group then came to Southeastern North Carolina to meet with state and local officials and visit the site.

The code name for this economic development effort is Project Roadrunner, according to Velva Jenkins, assistant vice president for economic and workforce development at Brunswick Community College.

Boyd, the site selection consultant, said the Southeast "is the prime search area because of right-to-work legislation and access to ports that show promise for the Panama Canal expansion."

That expansion allows larger and deeper-draft ships to traverse the canal, so East Coast ports that have deep waters are at an advantage for increased trade.

Both South Carolina and Georgia have deepwater ports.

"Not having (such a port) is a disadvantage, but this plant doesn't have to be located in the port environs. It would have to have good interstate access," Boyd said.

But the ability to train workers puts the Carolinas and Georgia in a competitive position.

One of the challenges to bringing labor back to the U.S. from abroad "is finding qualified people with manufacturing skills sets.

"You still have a manufacturing work ethic and skill sets. You have training available and have been doing that for decades," Boyd said.

"It is a major plant," he said, "a trophy project in capital investment and for labor, and will pay very competitive wages."

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