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Former plant in Ashe County met all of aerospace company's needs

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When Gov. Mike Easley made last week's announcement that a Europe-based aerospace-equipment company had chosen Ashe County as the place for a new \$44 million plant, a lot of people wondered just why such a plum landed in rural Northwest North Carolina.

Folks like West Jefferson Mayor Dale Baldwin understood the area's attractions: A strong work force, access to excellent community-college training programs and a modern building that could be readily converted and has views of Mount Jefferson, Buck Mountain and Phoenix Mountain. "We certainly think that you made a wise decision in selecting West Jefferson to locate," Baldwin told officials of Smiths Aerospace Components yesterday. "We think this was a good choice for both of us. You look at the mountains. It's a beautiful place to come to."

Dale Collins, the general manager of the company's Asheville operation, joined other corporate officials in accepting gifts of Ashe County cheese and lots of warm welcomes at a get-acquainted session with community leaders.

Collins said that the company considered 50 sites, before visiting six or so.

The West Jefferson plant is about a two-hour and 20-minute drive from the company's Asheville plant, which has 295 employees.

Trucks will be making the trip back and forth for a while, but Collins said that he envisions each plant as eventually functioning independently.

The West Jefferson plant is expected to employ 305 workers within five years, and will make such aircraft-engine components as turbines for jets. Smiths Aerospace is a major supplier to Boeing and Airbus, and provides equipment for civilian and military aircraft.

"The rotating parts tend to be the critical parts in the engine," Collins said. Those are the parts that will be made at the West Jefferson plant for shipment worldwide. Other aerospace companies make the static parts, such as airframes.

Collins said that the company spent months first deciding if there was adequate business to support a new plant. By last spring, they had decided there was and started looking for a new site.

They wanted an existing plant so they could get things up and running sooner. They wanted it to be no closer than 100 miles from the Asheville plant, he said, so they could tap into a new work force. They also didn't want it to be farther than a four-hour drive so the plants could share some things.

They needed an area that could provide a reliable labor pool and offer training he said. Wilkes Community College is expected to provide much of the on-site training in machining.

Corporate officials considered 12 sites in North Carolina. The final decision came down to the Ashe site and one in South Carolina. An incentives package played a big role in making it possible to choose the Ashe County site, Collins said, even though they are still working out whether they will lease or buy the building.

Ashe County commissioners approved incentives of \$50,000 a year for seven years, based on minimum expectations and with a sliding scale if the company exceeds expectations. Aldermen in West Jefferson approved incentives of \$25,000 a year for seven years.

The company could get a maximum of \$2.4 million over 12 years through the state Job Development Investment Grant program.

Continuing negotiations over the building could affect the timetable, but the company hopes to start hiring and moving in equipment within weeks, Collins said. It hopes to be shipping products by early 2006. Employment ads are to appear soon in the local newspaper; people may apply at the local Employment Security Commission office.

The new plant will be in the old Oldham Co. building, where saw blades and router bits were made. A year ago, Black & Decker bought Oldham as part of a package of companies and within weeks announced plans to close it, cutting 250 jobs.

The equipment was sold. The 100,000-square-foot manufacturing space is mostly empty now.

"I'd like to hear some racket in here," said Tommy McClure, who was the human-resources manager for Oldham and has been helping the companies make the transition.

Richard Blackburn, the vice-chairman of the Ashe County Board of Commissioners, summed up the feeling of revival. "Let me quickly express everyone's general feelings by saying we're tickled to death you're coming to Ashe County," he said, during a presentation.

Cabot Hamilton, the publisher of the Jefferson Post and the board president of the Ashe County Chamber of Commerce, said, "This is some of the best news we've had in a while. It's like a Christmas present."

The plant is close to downtown West Jefferson, but screened by hills. It shares the same beautiful views that can be seen from much of downtown, but the plant can't be seen from downtown.

Ed Mayer will be operations manager for the Ashe plant. He has nearly 20 years experience in the aerospace industry and had worked with Collins.

He jokingly looked at his watch about mid-afternoon to figure out how many hours he had worked for Smiths Aerospace. He started with the company at 7:30 a.m. yesterday.

"I'm extremely excited and confident we'll be successful and a part of this community for a long time," he said. "I think we have a very bright future here."