

Furniture Jobs Return



Written by PATRICK JEAN (O-N-E EDITOR)

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Maiden's furniture-making history paid off Thursday in the form of 302 new jobs.

Furniture maker Ethan Allen Inc. announced that it will expand its operations in the town, replacing 150 jobs lost in layoffs last year and adding 159 new employees.

Ethan Allen is leaving a leased facility in Chino, Calif., where 202 people work, and consolidating those operations in the Maiden site, which currently employs 540.

Hiring will begin immediately, said Nathan Huret, Existing Industry Coordinator for the Catawba County Economic Development Corp.

"They could go to the Web site (www.ethanallen.com) or to the Maiden plant," he said Thursday. "They could go tomorrow. There's no real lag time to it."

Rumors of Ethan Allen wanting to leave the California site began circulating in late January or early February, Huret said. The EDC contacted company officials, he said.

"The underlying reason they were considering all of this," he said, "if you look at their latest advertising, they celebrate 'American Innovation.' They've pulled operations out of Asia, and are bringing them back to the States."

Todd Herms, town manager of Maiden, agreed.

"We're elated that they chose Maiden with our history," he said. "From where I stand, it goes to show the quality of people and employees we have in the area, to produce the kind of furniture and product that Ethan Allen demands. They have a long history with Maiden and Catawba County."

Huret said Maiden-area furniture workers have "skills that can't be matched anywhere else. California doesn't have those skills. You can't beat the quality in Maiden anywhere else in the world."

Maiden, Catawba County and the EDC worked with Ethan Allen and provided technical assistance with the company applying for a grant, Herms said.

Ethan Allen received a \$109,000 grant from the One North Carolina Fund, which provides financial assistance to attract business projects and create new jobs.

A local matching amount will have to come from Maiden, Catawba County and other funding sources, Huret said. Public hearings will be set up by the Maiden Town Council and the Catawba County Board of Commissioners, which would have to approve the match, he said.

In exchange for the money, Ethan Allen will be required to maintain the new jobs and its new investment for a certain number of years, Huret said. Details will emerge at the public hearings, he said.

In return for the grant money and local match, Ethan Allen will invest \$2.6 million in the Maiden plant on South Main Avenue, Herms said. The plant will not be expanded, but "a lot of equipment is being transferred or being purchased to upgrade the facility," he said.

The investment could eventually total \$3 million, Herms said.

The jobs will be phased in through 2011, the town manager said. However, "The majority of the jobs will be filled in the next 12 to 18 months," he said.

The jobs will range from upholstery to router and spring-up operators and some supervisors, Herms and Huret said. "Prior skills are sought after," Huret said.

"To become a good upholsterer takes five or six years," Huret said. "But it's a learning curve since everybody does it a different way. Anybody with existing skills should transform fairly easily."

Ethan Allen officials did not return calls and e-mails seeking comment.

In a press release, Farooq Kathwari, President and Chief Executive Officer of Ethan Allen, said, "We are pleased that we are able to expand our upholstery operations in Maiden, North Carolina, where our highly skilled workers have produced handcrafted, custom-made upholstery since 1949. It is also gratifying to be able to work in partnership with the North Carolina state and local governments, to help both our business and the local Maiden community."

Herms and Huret agreed.

"We're very happy to have it happen," Huret said. "You would think given the residential market, we'd be hearing bad news."

"They're happy," Herms said of Ethan Allen. "They've got a long history here, and they've always been a good community partner. They're happy to see that they're staying in Maiden and not going to another area or another country."

The town manager thanked the town council, the town itself, the county and the EDC for making it happen.

"With all manufacturing jobs as technology evolves, the need for labor diminishes," he said. "But in a day and age where local governments bite and scratch to get the 10 to 20 to 50 jobs that go along with the business, we're elated to get the materials and the money.

"I really and truly believe that it is the people who live in the area that worked for Ethan Allen that were really the straw in the camel's back, that swayed the decision to move it to Maiden," he added. "It's hard to get good help these days."

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