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## Lee Industries expanding into Conover

By Sharon McBrayer



Lee Industries is expanding its operation to Conover, bringing 75 new jobs with it and renovating a facility that once was a bustling furniture company.

Lee Industries, which makes upholstered furniture, plans to move into the old Conover Chair manufacturing building. It also plans to move its corporate headquarters to the Conover location, said Norman Coley, president of Lee Industries. The company currently has three manufacturing facilities in Newton.

Lee Industries, which opened in Newton in 1969, plans to hire cutters, sewers, spring-up workers, upholsterers, shipping and support personnel for its Conover plant.

The company is getting some help with its expansion from the city of Conover and Catawba County.

Conover City Council and county commissioners met Wednesday to consider economic development incentives for the company. The city council of Conover approved its incentive to the company, with council member Penny Corpening recusing herself from the vote. She asked to be excused from the

proceedings because her family owns Matthews Construction Company.

Corpening said there's no conflict of interest but she just wanted to make sure the public knows she had no part in the vote in case her family's company gets any work due to the renovation of the Conover plant.

Conover's economic development incentive is a one-time grant of \$89,000 and the city will pay an estimated \$30,000 in administrative cost for application to the Community Development Block Grant Building Reuse Program.

The Catawba County Board of Commissioners also approved an incentive package that includes a one-time cash payment of \$50,000.

In return, the company has to create 75 jobs, buy the property it intends to renovate, which has been in foreclosure, and pay off delinquent taxes, say officials.

County Commissioner Dan Hunsucker said, "It's always very pleasing to the board to help a local company."

Conover Mayor Lee Moritz Jr. told the crowd gathered for the announcement, "We're just so thankful we have the Coley family wanting to invest in our city."

City, county and economic development officials raved about the success of the homegrown company on Wednesday.

Ron Leitch with the North Carolina Department of Commerce said it was a good day for unemployed furniture workers, and jokingly said that Lee Industries has apparently forgotten the area and the country has been in an economic recession.

Not only has the company remained in business but it has grown. Part of that growth is due to its export sales to other countries.

And in a true twist of irony, one of its overseas customers is China. Coley said in China having something made in America is prestigious. He said there are even "Made in America" stores springing up in China. The furniture is 99.9 percent American made, said Nathan Huret, existing industry coordinator for Catawba County Economic Development.

Lee Industries also exports to Europe, Central America and Canada, Coley said.

When other furniture companies were closing up shop in America and moving overseas, Coley never considered doing the same.

"I told my people I wasn't going to sell them out," Coley said. He also told them that if they were going to get beaten in business they would get beaten at their own game.

Moritz said after the meeting that Lee Industries is a company that's dedicated to the American worker.

It is because of imports from places such as China that has helped Lee Industries grow, Coley said.

Coley said his company listened to customers and what they wanted and got it to them in a timely

manner. While overseas companies may try to beat other furniture competitors by offering lower prices, Coley's company offers what he calls "customization."

Coley said people aren't looking for cookie-cutter furniture pieces anymore.

"Imports used to come out of Tupelo, Miss.," Coley said with a grin. "Now they come out of China."

Moritz said it will be exciting to see another furniture company move into a Conover Chair plant in downtown. It's a building he knows well.

His father, Lee Moritz Sr., 80, who was in the audience Wednesday, worked for Conover Chair for 32 years. For his father to be at the announcement and know the plant will once again be a showplace was very special, the mayor said.

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