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Published on *The Observer News Enterprise* (<http://www.observernewsenterprise.com>)

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Created 03/18/2011 - 3:39pm

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Advance Pierre Foods is about halfway to the job-creation requirements outlined in an incentives package provided to the company when it expanded its Claremont operations last year.

The company announced a year ago this month that it will add 500 jobs and bring a \$16.8-million investment to the Claremont facility on East Main Street.

The company has until December to fulfill those requirements, which means 264 jobs must be added to the facility in nine months or Pierre Foods will risk losing its incentives.

Claremont City Manager Doug Barrick said he recently received an e-mail from Pierre Foods saying the company added 236 jobs since the company's announcement last year. The company's Claremont production facility, before the expansion, employed about 700 people. The incentives, offered by the Catawba County Board of Commissioners and Claremont City Council, require the company to expand its number of workers to at least 1,200.

When the job-creation announcement was made in March 2010, Claremont Mayor Dave Morrow called Pierre Foods an "important member of the Claremont community for over 30 years."

Catawba County Board of Commissioners chairwoman Kitty Barnes also praised the company's expansion and investment, saying, "We're very grateful that Pierre Foods has selected their Catawba County facility for this expansion. These jobs, both old and new, will have a real, tangible impact" on area families.

The facility's physical expansion is completed, adding about 45,000 square feet to the facility's existing 112,000-square-foot building.

"They're really making good strides," Barrick said of Pierre's growth in facility and employment.

Claremont City Council voted in January to give Pierre Foods tax incentives equal to an 80-percent reduction in property taxes during the next five years. The Catawba County Board of Commissioners also approved a similar package.

The building's expansion is complete, but the company continues to renovate and improve on equipment, like the assembly line, inside the building.

Once those renovations are completed, Barrick expects Pierre Foods to start hiring more workers, who start as entry-level employees with the opportunity to advance within the company.

About 1 million sandwich products are made every day at Pierre Foods' Claremont facility. The sandwiches are part of the company's line of fully cooked meat products, which can be found in schools, vending machines and other retail markets.

Pierre Foods jobs aren't the only jobs that could be available in Claremont in the coming months. Sutter Street Manufacturing, a division of Williams-Sonoma, recently leased Claremont's vacant warehouse on Kelly Boulevard.

If and when jobs will come remains unclear.

"They've been very vague with the city and with the timeline," Barrick said, adding that most of Claremont's involvement with the project was limited to working with the Catawba County Economic Development Corporation.

Job growth and creation, Barrick said, remains a priority for Claremont. Business recruitment, however, doesn't have to be limited to large companies.

"We also want to focus on the main-street businesses," Barrick said.

Barrick and City Council members discussed business recruitment and retention during their annual budget workshop in February.

Other departmental goals and priorities for 2011-12 discussed during the workshop include:

- Upgrading the city's website and Facebook pages;
- Allowing residents to pay utility bills with debit cards at City Hall;
- Creating an emergency action plan;
- Updating city job descriptions.

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Advance Pierre Foods is halfway to job-creation requirements outlined in incentives packages provided by Claremont City Council and the Catawba County Board of Commissioners.

CLAREMONT, NC

O-N-E Staff Writer

Observer News Enterprise

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