



THE OBSERVER NEWS ENTERPRISE


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

[Home](#) > Investment gives market boost

Investment gives market boost

By *composing*

Created 06/29/2011 - 8:48pm

 [6-30 lee industries1.jpg](#) [1]

By NASH DUNN

nashdunn.one@gmail.com [2]

Every day, the occasional train pulls a short line of box cars along portions of the Norfolk Southern Railroad in Catawba County. After chugging through farmland and rural pastures in Maiden, the railroad enters Newton, and then Conover — passing an array of abandoned textile and furniture plants that once thrived with life.

But since the millennium, the plants that once powered the county's economy have lost about 34,000 jobs to other areas of the country and overseas. This caused some to say the furniture and textile industry in the Greater Hickory area was dead.

Recent developments, however, are making those skeptics scratch their head, as several local businesses are making investments in the area that may give Catawba County's manufacturing credibility a heavy dose of adrenaline.

The newest local investment will bring more than 75 jobs to Conover, which is one of the hardest hit areas in Catawba County from the struggling economy, according to city and county officials.

Lee Industries Inc., an eco-friendly upholstery company based in Newton, announced Wednesday that it will redevelop and renovate a former textile mill near downtown Conover later this year.

The company plans on hiring cutters, sewers, spring-up associates, inside and outside upholsterers, shipping personnel and support staff, among other positions. The average pay for the jobs is expected to be about \$41,045 — nearly \$7,000 more than the average pay for workers living in Catawba County.

Lee Industries already employs 490 people at its existing three facilities in Newton — jobs that will be retained.

The upholstery company will invest \$2.5 million in the renovation of the old Conover Chair facility at 210 Fourth St. SW not far from downtown Conover.

On Wednesday, the Conover City Council and Catawba County Board of Commissioners held a special meeting to approve a partnership incentive package for Lee Industries.

Conover City Council approved an \$89,000 cash grant for the Lee Industries project while County Commissioners OK'd a \$50,000 cash grant to assist the redevelopment.

"I have a business across the road from the Conover Chair facility, and to see a diamond in the rough come alive again is great," said Joie Fulbright, Conover city councilman. "It is just exciting to know that they chose Conover and for us to be able to give them some help."

Conover's property tax rate of 40 cents per \$100 of valuation, one of the lowest in Catawba County, has allowed the city to attract businesses to move the area, said Conover city councilman Don A. Beal.

Beal said one of those businesses is the Manufacturing Solutions Center (MSC), a high-tech research facility that helps entrepreneurs and inventors develop prototypes and commercialize their products to market. MSC created and saved about 129 jobs in North Carolina in 2008-09 and will be relocating to the new Conover Station complex that is scheduled to open in early 2012.

"People should not be so depressed and discouraged because of the economy," Beal said. "There are good things out there that can happen."

Locally grown

Though Lee Industries will be moving to Conover, they are by no means new to Catawba County.

The company, founded by Newton residents Bill and Dottie Coley, has been manufacturing high-quality, American-made furniture in Newton since 1969.

Coley's son, Norman, is now the president of the company and said he is proud to continue to support the local community, economy and environment.

"We have outgrown our existing three manufacturing facilities, and we are proud to add this fourth," Norman said. "It will be a showpiece in the city of Conover and something we are all going to be proud of for many years to come."

Norman said his company increased its market share in a number of residential, contract, casual and now international areas — markets that are fueling the company's growth.

Rob Leitch, from the N.C. Department of Commerce, called Lee Industries one of shining stars in the state's industrial community.

"I think (Lee Industries has) certainly forgot that we've had a recession going on," Leitch said. "They must have a dictionary that does not have that word in there because they just keep moving right along creating new jobs and creating beautiful furniture for the American consumer."

Leitch presented Coley, Norman and Lee Industries Chief Financial Officer Bill McKinney with a North Carolina state flag Wednesday in honor of their achievements.

Natural LEE

In addition to jobs, Lee Industries provides eco-friendly manufacturing practices and initiatives, Norman said. The company has worked with engineers to create innovations like the soy-based cushion, which can save gallons of crude oil in the manufacturing process.

Norman said his company has strived to be as sustainable and responsible since 1984, before the "going green" revolution began.

"You'll never be 100 percent sustainable, but every little bit helps," Norman said, adding that the company hopes to get the revamped facility Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) certified.

In addition to soy-based cushions, Lee Industries uses sustainable wood for frame construction, recycled fibers from clear plastic water bottles for throw cushions and fabrics that include several natural and organic fabrics, according to Lee Industry's website.

"We were 'green' before 'green' became acceptable," McKinney said. "You see, being 'green' can be a marketing strategy or it can be real. Lee Industries pioneered the use of the soy-based cushions, reducing dependency upon petroleum-based products."

Lee Industries, Inc., an eco-friendly upholstery company based in Newton, announced Wednesday that it will redevelop and renovate a former textile mill near downtown Conover beginning late this year.

CONOVER, N.C.

O-N-E Staff Writer

Observer News Enterprise

656ee282d97fced92dfd918f9bf273c8

**Copyright © 2011 The Observer News Enterprise | 309 North College Avenue | Newton, N.C. 28658
| (828) 464-0221**

All property rights for the entire contents of this publication shall be the property of The Observer News Enterprise.

No part hereof may be reproduced without prior written consent.

Site Development: [Maine Web FX](#)

Source URL: <http://www.observernewsenterprise.com/content/investment-gives-market-boost>

Links:

[1] http://www.observernewsenterprise.com/sites/default/files/6-30_lee_industries1.jpg

[2] <mailto:nashdunn.one@gmail.com>