

General Dynamics announces plans to expand in Smyth

BY LEE ANN PRESCOTT
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General Dynamics Armament and Technical Products
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MARION -- General Dynamics announced Tuesday it plans to expand its operations here, investing \$6.5 million in the process and creating at least 75 new jobs by Christmas.

It was good news for Smyth County, which in the past few years has suffered plant closings and the loss of hundreds of manufacturing jobs. Until recently, its employment rate was in the double digits.

"General Dynamics Armament and Technical Products plans to transfer resin transfer molding operations to our facilities in Marion," said Phillip D. Hynes, vice president of strategic planning and business integration.

He said resin transfer molding is a unique process for manufacturing lightweight, high-strength composite structures for advanced aircraft.

He said Lockheed Martin and Boeing as well as high-profile Defense Department programs like the F/A-22 Raptor and the F/A-18 Hornet use the parts.

"We would expect that production operations, the actual manufacturing of parts, the movement of those operations, will begin in six to eight weeks," Hynes said. "We have a transition implementation team in place to ensure a smooth transition for our customers and programs."

He said the transfer -- part of which is coming from a plant in DeLand, Fla. -- would begin immediately and be complete by the end of the year. It will mean about 75 new jobs, with a future potential of 120, Hynes said.

Hynes made the announcement before the Smyth County Board of Supervisors.

Marion plant manager Rock Benoit joined Hynes. Benoit said the local operation would see some construction as General Dynamics makes the transition and said it would involve "refurbishing of the existing space we have available."

"It's all already under roof," Hynes said. "It's just setting things up for this operation."

He said certain tasks in the new operation would involve particular job skills and that the county has offered to help with training.

Applications for the new positions may be made through the local Virginia Employment Commission office.

At the same time Hynes and Benoit were talking with the Board of Supervisors, Gov. Mark R. Warner was announcing the industrial expansion from Richmond.

"Virginia successfully competed with several other states for the project," the governor said. "I am pleased General Dynamics chose Virginia for this job-creating investment. The skilled work force, available space and central East Coast location of the company's Smyth County facility make it the right choice for this expansion."

The Marion facility employs more than 650 people and includes three manufacturing sites totaling more than 1 million square feet.

The county worked with state leaders to put together an incentives package for General Dynamics. Warner approved a \$300,000 grant from the Governor's Opportunity Fund to help the county with the project, and the county applied for and received \$300,000 in Tobacco Region Opportunity Funds from the Virginia Tobacco Indemnification and Community Revitalization Commission.

The Virginia Economic Development Partnership worked with Smyth County's economic development team on the expansion.

The happiest faces of the day were those of local leaders who have worked day and night to attract new jobs.

"We are excited about the commitment made today by General Dynamics to invest in Smyth County," said Saltville District Supervisor Mike Roberts, chairman of the Board of Supervisors. "These new technology-based jobs will be a great boost to our local economy, and we are proud to be able to help support this expansion."

General Dynamics Armament and Technical Products, a business unit of Virginia-based General Dynamics, is headquartered in Burlington, Vt. It designs, develops and produces high-performance armament systems; a full range of advanced composite-based products; biological and chemical detection systems; tactical deception equipment; and mobile shelter systems.

Herald Courier Staff Writer Laura Copeland contributed to this report.

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