

Zodiac runs full throttle

Expansion planned as demand for lightweight boats soars

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While most boat makers have seen sales fall off in the face of high fuel prices, a French watercraft manufacturer with a local plant has found a silver, er, rubber lining.

Demand has soared for the lightweight, rubber-bottomed boats made in Summerville by Zodiac of North America Inc., and as a result, the company plans to expand the operation.

The investment will likely double Zodiac's local work force and create temporary construction jobs while it adds on to its 40,000-square-foot plant on Deming Way.

The project shows that some companies can thrive despite tough economic times, said vice president Howard French, citing record sales at recent boat show in Florida.

"In a bad economy, with the marine industry struggling, we had our best show," he said.

The Paris-based company makes traditional fiberglass boats that are lined on the outside with an inflatable tube. The padding makes the vessel lighter so it sits higher on the water, causing it to use less fuel.

French cited a study that found Zodiac boats use about half the fuel of a conventional power boat.

"In Europe, they're the most popular form of boating because they're light and they don't require a big pickup truck to pull them," he said.

The expansion project will nearly double the company's workforce to 66 employees. Zodiac also plans to build additional manufacturing and office space, bringing the facility's size up to 87,000 square feet.

The company expects to build about 1,000 boats next year, up from the 700 boats projected for this year.

The workers will make two models of watercraft: a typical fishing boat — part of the company's Pro series line — and a small tender that's used to ferry passengers from large yachts to land.

Zodiac began its South Carolina operations in late 2005 when it arranged for Scout Boats to build their models. But both companies grew so quickly, French said, that Zodiac officials later decided to rent out a nearby warehouse and hire their own workers.

The plan to expand their existing site is still in the permitting process. French said he hopes the project will finish in May.

Company officials looked at sites in Georgia and North Carolina but settled on expanding their existing Summerville plant because wages were lower, he said.

Zodiac also was drawn to the availability of raw manufacturing materials that stems from the presence of other boat manufacturers, such as Scout, Key West Boats Inc. in Ridgeville and Sea Fox Boats near Moncks Corner.

"We've very enthusiastic about this location," French said.

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