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Another national ranking for city

Decatur No. 3 in US industry site selection

By Eric Fleischauer

Staff Writer

Decatur placed third in the nation among comparably sized cities in Site Selection Magazine's 2008 compilation of top industry getters.

Decatur had nine qualifying new plants in 2008, tying it for third in metropolitan areas with populations between 50,000 and 200,000.

"Considering the year that we had, with a little slowdown in the middle of the year, it's of big significance," said Jeremy Nails, president of the Decatur-Morgan County Economic Development Association. "The fact that we had enough projects to rank No. 3 means a lot to our existing industries."

Two other Alabama cities received mention.

Tuscaloosa tied for eighth place in the same population category as Decatur. Daphne-Fairhope was in second place among cities with between 10,000 and 50,000 people.

Only corporate projects involving a capital investment of at least \$1 million that generated at least 50 new jobs and added at least 20,000 square feet of floor area qualified for the competition.

The qualifying projects in Decatur included:

- National Packaging added four production lines at a cost of \$6.4 million.
- Wayne Farms built an \$18 million cold storage warehouse.
- Hexcel Corp. invested \$180 million in additional production lines.
- Del Monte Corp.'s Meow Mix invested \$7.5 million into dryers and extruders for pet food.
- BMSI had a \$1.4 million expansion.
- Nucor built a galvanizing line that will begin production when the economy improves.
- BP upgraded its plant for production of a chemical used to make clear plastic bottles.
- United Launch Alliance added a warehouse and is renovating its plant to accommodate production of Atlas V satellite-launch rockets.
- Magic Steel, a Nucor customer, is building a new plant in Nucor's industrial park.

Decatur tied with Danville, Va., in its class. Sioux City, Iowa, was first and Springfield, Ohio, was second.

Not many prospects

Nails said contacts from industrial prospects are well below normal due to the recession.

"Right now people are holding onto their cash and not investing in too many capital projects if they weren't already planned or in the works," Nails said.

His goal is to position his agency to be ready for growth when the economy improves.

"We're planning ahead, planning for the future," Nails said. "Everything from making sure we have available, ready-to-go sites to infrastructure, to planning the way we're going to market in the future."

Future marketing, he predicts, will target renewable fuels, especially potential customers of the county's metal processors, and other industries that would benefit from the federal stimulus package.

"We're also really involved in work force development, with our existing industries and high schools and Calhoun Community College," Nails said. "We're looking at redirection of skills for people that may have worked somewhere for so many years and lost their job. We're looking to have them assessed so they can re-enter the job market."

Nails said the Interstate 65 business park near Hartselle remains on hold until the bond market improves. The bonds will be funded through Tennessee Valley Authority in-lieu-of-tax revenue. In the meantime, Nails said, municipalities are retaining the funds.

"I did remind all the municipalities and the county that once we have a bond issue, that money is diverted," Nails said. "There shouldn't be any surprises for them."