Governor Celebrates Continental Tire's New Plant

JEFFREY COLLINS - Associated Press

South Carolina Gov. Nikki Haley put on a hardhat, stepped gingerly into the red dirt in her sandals, grabbed a gold shovel and celebrated what might be the crowning jewel in her push to bring jobs to the state.

The governor joined executives from Continental Tire, the North America arm of German-based Continental AG, and hundreds of people from the company and community for a groundbreaking ceremony Wednesday at the site of the new $500 million plant. The first tire should roll off the assembly line in 2014, with about 1,600 workers employed by the time the plant is completely built and fully operating in 2021.

Haley's first year in office was rough at times politically, but she has spotlighted bringing jobs to South Carolina. The state's unemployment rate is now at 9.3 percent. It was 10.5 percent when she took office in January 2011. She told the crowd she has brought 22,000 new jobs to the state since becoming governor and reminded them she was in Sumter not that long ago to celebrate Chinese candy-maker Au'some's new plant and its 120 jobs.

"We earned it. We deserved it. And we can do it again," Haley said.

Haley has struggled politically in recent months. She was criticized by supporters of the port in Charleston for pushing a permit to allow dredging the Savannah River that will help the port in Savannah, Ga. There also were several times where she was caught exaggerating or repeating information that was not true, such as that half of the people applying for jobs at the Savannah River Site failed drug tests. The actual figure was around 1 percent.

South Carolina beat out Louisiana and North Carolina for the Continental Tire plant. The state poured $31 million into the project, and Sumter County gave the 330-acre site, secured in the final hours of negotiations by local officials begging landowners after the tire maker said the first site offered was unsuitable.

One of the men who went door-to-door to find the site, Sumter Economic Development Board Chairman Greg Thompson, said the plant can be a key component in expanding the region's economic diversity beyond Shaw Air Force Base and the military. Sumter County's unemployment rate in January was 10.7 percent, well above the state rate.

"I think the grin on my face says everything I need to say," Thompson said. "What a glorious day for Sumter. How many ways can I say thank you?"

Continental Tire executives said South Carolina's willingness to do anything necessary to secure the plant, along with its location near its customers, suppliers

and the port in Charleston, convinced them Sumter County was the right place for the new factory.

"We want to bring the world to Sumter, and Sumter to the world," said Nikolai Setzer, a Continental executive board member.

Work has already started. Much of the land is cleared, with large piles of dirt dotting the landscape. Several workers in hardhats joined the executives and community leaders for the free coffee and sweets. But there is still plenty of work to do. The road leading to the site off U.S. 521 south of Sumter is still dirt and gravel. The lot where the ceremony took place was graded with loose stones.

But that didn't stop a carefully walking Haley from enjoying this moment. She said bringing a well-regarded international firm like Continental Tire to the state opens more doors for economic development.

"We build things. We build planes, we build cars, we build tires, we make candy," Haley said. "South Carolina is a state that makes things and everybody across the country is taking notice."

The governor again used one of her favorite economic development terms, saying she can't wait to return to the plant when it is up and running and see "the big mac daddy tires" the factory will make. "Are these not the most beautiful tires you have ever seen?" she asked.

And she promised that getting companies, especially manufacturers, to come to South Carolina will be her top priority.

"I will continue to be your No. 1 employer," Haley said.

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