

High-precision bearing plant set for N. Charleston

By Katy Stech
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Two companies, including a unit of General Electric, are teaming up to make jet engine components in North Charleston.

GE Aviation and the SKF Group, a Swedish manufacturer, have formed Venture Aerobearings to make and repair high-precision steel bearings in a business park off Ladson Road.

The company plans to hire its first employees early next year, said Eric Hinton, president. At full production, the plant will employ 100 workers, he said.

Venture Aerobearings plans to start making the jet parts next summer at a 127,000-square-foot plant in Palmetto Commerce Park. A Georgia construction company that owns several other properties in the park is building the \$10 million facility, which can be expanded by 100,000 square feet, Hinton said.

He said GE and SKF picked North Charleston over other cities because of the available pool of workers and South Carolina's business-friendly atmosphere, among other factors.

The engine pieces that will be made in North Charleston will be shipped to GE engine assembly plants in places such as Durham, N.C., Albuquerque, N.M., and Boston.

The demand for the internal parts is being fueled by sales of newer, more fuel-efficient airplanes, said GE spokeswoman Deb Case.

When airlines recovered from the slowdown that followed the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, some chose to modernize their fleets, Case said. That created a demand for more jet engines, which in turn triggered a need for more bearings.

GE will likely break its sales record this year for commercial engines, as it did last year, she said.

SKF has had a presence in the region for several years.

About two years ago, the Swedish company agreed to invest \$12.5 million in a 100-worker bearing plant in North Charleston's Pepperdam Industrial Park. In 2002, the company opened SKF Aero Bearing Service Center, which repairs engine and transmission bearings on Investment Drive. Case said GE has formed new businesses with suppliers like SKF in the past. It's a way for the company to meet demand for parts during peak production periods, she said.

"That way, we make sure we can keep the parts-flow going and ensure that we have the quality of the parts we need," Case said.

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