

CHARLESTON REGIONAL
BUSINESS JOURNAL

American LaFrance construction proceeding smoothly

January 22, 2007

By Dan McCue,
Staff Writer

Construction of American LaFrance's new headquarters and assembly facility alongside Interstate 26 in Berkeley County is going so smoothly that the emergency and vocational vehicle manufacturer plans to move its equipment to the site in mid-May, weeks before it was originally scheduled to vacate its current facility at Palmetto Commerce Park.

Karen Haun, the company's spokeswoman, said employees and "product" will be relocated to the facility by the first week of June.

"The walls have been poured and are being cured as we speak," she said. "At this rate, we expect they'll be put into place by the middle of the month. Everything is moving along very, very well."

American LaFrance announced its intention to move last May, five months after the company was acquired by Patriarch Partners, a New York-based investment company.

As part of the deal, DaimlerChrysler took ownership of the American LaFrance facility and shortly thereafter revealed that it would expand its North American operations on the site, retrofitting the facility for the assembly of Sprinter vans.

Although the vans will initially be assembled in Stuttgart, Germany, they will be partially disassembled and shipped through the Port of Charleston. Once here, they'll be put back together through an assembly line process quite unlike American LaFrance's production procedures, which more closely resemble those of a custom vehicle shop.

The two companies have been dual users of the Palmetto Commerce Park site since November; that arrangement is formally scheduled to end in July.

American LaFrance originally planned to relocate to 45 acres adjacent to the campus of Charleston Southern University in North Charleston, but that plan was revised when the company and the site's design-build developer were unable to finalize the deal that would permit the timely completion of the plant.

Last August, the company announced it had settled on another location, adjacent to the huge Piggly Wiggly warehouse near Summerville. It also entered into an agreement with Spartanburg-based Johnson Development Associates Inc., which is currently overseeing the construction of both the new headquarters and a state-of-the-art assembly plant.

"Because of our imminent move in 2007 from the existing facility to accommodate DaimlerChrysler's expansion in Palmetto Commerce Park, it was critical that we finalize our site arrangements," American LaFrance President and CEO John Stevenson said of the change.

So satisfied has the company been with the progress of construction that it's even placed a Web cam atop the Piggly Wiggly warehouse, which interested members of the public can access at www.americanlafrance.com, under News.

When completed, the assembly plant will be 440,000 square feet, while the headquarters building will be 57,000 square feet. She said to date the company has not issued a statement about the exact monetary amount of its

investment in Berkeley County, Haun said.

"We're just focusing on getting the building done, and right now I can tell you the site is a hub of activity," she said. "There are a lot of people on site, a lot of equipment and we're all working hard to meet our deadline."

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