

Lee Industries to renovate old factory in downtown Conover

By Charlene H. Carpenter
PUBLISHED IN: GASTON/CATAWBA NEWS

Furniture manufacturer Lee Industries is investing more than \$5 million into renovating an old manufacturing facility in downtown Conover which will allow the Newton-based company to expand its operations and hire an additional 75 people.

The company, which makes environmentally friendly furniture in three manufacturing plants in Newton, is renovating the former Conover Chair facility, which closed in the late 1990s.

The factory, on 17 acres near the railroad track in downtown Conover, will give the company an additional 100,000 square feet and allow it to expand its manufacturing 35 percent over time, according to company President Norman Coley. The corporate offices and showroom will be moved from one of its Newton facilities, leaving room to expand manufacturing at that factory by 15 percent, according to Coley.

Initially, Lee will employ 35 additional employees and hopes to increase that to 75 by the end of next year. The average employee wage is expected to be \$41,045 a year, nearly \$7,000 a year more than the average pay in Catawba County.

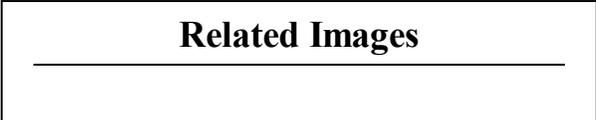
The company employs 500 people at three plants and a warehouse in Newton. All of those facilities will continue operating.

Plans are to move into the new facility in December of this year. When manufacturing at the new plant reaches full capacity, it will employ more than 200 people. Depending on the economy, Coley says he expects that to occur within 15 years.

Renovating an existing property rather than building a new one goes with the company's environmentally friendly approach to manufacturing as well as the city of Conover's vision to create jobs and fill the many manufacturing faculties that sit empty throughout the county.

The city has developed a 27-acre tract downtown that once housed a Broyhill Furniture factory into a mixed-used development called Conover Station. The property is across the railroad tracks from the Lee Industries site. The city renovated the old Warlong Glove building on the property to house the city library, meeting space and the offices of Greenway Public Transit system. It also will house the regional railroad depot for future passenger train service.

The city is building a 30,000 square-foot building on the property for the Manufacturing Solutions Center, currently on the campus of Catawba Valley Community College in Hickory. The center works with U.S. manufacturers to help them create and retain jobs by increasing sales, improving product quality and improving efficiency. The city also plans to put a city park on five acres. City officials would like to see the



rest of the property developed with a combination of retail, light manufacturing, technology services and downtown housing.

The city, which worked to recruit a company to purchase and repurpose the old Conover Chair plant, helped Lee Industries get a forgivable \$750,000 building reuse loan from the N.C. Department of Commerce. If the company completes the remodel and hires the 75 employees, the state will forgive the loan at 20 percent per year for five years, according to City Manager Donald Duncan. The city and Catawba County helped the bank that owned the property clean up the property so it would sell.

“This is a win-win-win situation because we had a derelict old building in the heart of Conover that is being repurposed,” said Duncan. “And when it is completed, it will be a huge asset to the community rather than a drain. It is the same concept we had with the old Broyhill property across the street – turning a liability into a community asset. And the jobs are high quality, paying \$7,000 more a year than the average wage in Catawba County.”

When Lee finishes renovating the Conover Chair site, Coley says it will be a “jewel” for downtown Conover.

“It will have a stone and stucco facade and anodized bronze window frames with bronze glass,” said Coley. “It will reflect who we are – a domestic manufacturer who plans to stay here.”

The renovation will reflect the commitment Lee Industries has to eco-friendly manufacturing and sustainability.

“We are replacing the old roof with a new high-efficiency roof with a high insulation factor,” explained Coley. “And, all the heating and cooling is the latest technology, which is super-efficient.” High-efficiency lighting will be used throughout the building as well as high-efficiency glass. The landscaping will reflect the company’s commitment to the environment.

Lee Industries has been a leader in environmentally-friendly furniture manufacturing since the 1980s. Started in 1969 by Coley’s parents, Bill and Dottie Coley, the company spearheaded environmentally-sound manufacturing practices and sustainable initiatives in the furniture industry. Its commitment to the environment is incorporated in its products, its manufacturing processes and its people, according to Coley. It pioneered the use of soy-based cushions which replaces part of the petroleum in the cushions with renewable soybean oil; all the wood it uses is certified from renewable resources in managed forests.

“We manufacture the goods in an environmentally friendly way by energy conservation, water conservation and recycling efforts – anything that goes out of these buildings is recycled with exception of food scrap and waste,” explained Coley. “With our people, we have a green team that educates and informs the associates that work with us as well as our supply chain about being (environmentally) responsible.”

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