

AOC builds for future in Piperton

Resin specialist breaking ground on new headquarters

By Cathryn Stout (Contact)

Friday, October 26, 2007

As the continent's leader in resin production, AOC has built its reputation on making cutting-edge products for its customers. The industrial giant supplies the raw material for products like bowling balls, spas, Corvette panels, luxury yachts and sewer pipes.



Photos by Chris Desmond/Special to The Commercial Appeal

Deaderick Wright mixes the color green into a batch of resin at AOC in Piperton, where the company has been doing business since the 1960s and will hold a groundbreaking ceremony today for its new corporate headquarters.

Now it's turning that high-tech focus inward with an \$8 million capital improvement project. Today, the 46-year-old organization will have a private groundbreaking for its expanded corporate headquarters in Piperton.

"We have just had a very long and successful relationship with Piperton and Fayette County," said Fred Norman, vice president and chief financial officer.

"It made good sense for us to stay in the same site that we've called home since the 1960s," he added.

A subsidiary of The Alpha Corp. of Tennessee, which is also based in Piperton, Alpha merged with a division of Owens Corning in 1998 under the name AOC. The bulk of Alpha's 250 employees are AOC affiliates.

About 70 executives and support staff will move into the new facility, giving the research and development department room to spread out in the original building.

The updated corporate center will be across from

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Technologist Chris Moss evaluates samples in the quality control department of resin maker AOC in Piperton.

its current headquarters on Tenn. 57, just east of Collierville city limits. The building will contain 49,350 square feet and be built on a slice of the company's 64-acre lot.

In the midst of an economic downturn, Norman admits that expanding is costly. "It's certainly possible for us to keep that money in our pockets, but we're looking at building for the future," he said.

The company closed last year with \$506 million in sales. It expects a 5 percent decrease in sales this year because of less demand from

customers in the housing and automotive industries.

Its diverse customer base insulates the company from drastic losses. Furthermore, the manufacturing master aggressively forges into growth segments like making materials for windmill blades for the surging field of wind energy.

Globalization is another corporate buzzword that they've latched onto, evidenced by factory partnerships on three continents.

The third factor that gives it an edge is research.

"Clearly we invest more in technology than any of our competitors," said chairman and CEO Randy Weghorst.

Although plant workers took turns making sarcastic comments about the factory's leaky roof on a recent rainy day, executives said they spend thousands of dollars on plant improvements each year.

One upgrade that is evident is the digitally controlled manufacturing process.

The plant and research departments are run by chemists who toss out the properties of elements on the periodic table as though they're reciting the batting averages of major league baseball players.

Among its arsenal of more than 1,000 formulas, AOC has recipes for resins that resist fire and corrosion and are durable in water.

After some consideration, company spokesman Steve Martin revealed that company has "progressed quite a long way" on a formula that is resistant to ultraviolet rays.

Perfecting such a chemical cocktail is a process of trial and error, said research and development technologist Kamana Kigweba.

Dressed in a white lab coat, gloves and goggles, Kigweba poured a "not to be revealed" clear liquid into a plastic container resting on a scale.

His challenge for the day was to reduce the thickness of a raw material used by a bathroom tub manufacturer.

"Sometimes it takes three months, sometimes it takes six months, sometimes it takes 12 months until we get what the customer needs," said Kigweba. "But when we do it's a great feeling, a great feeling indeed."