

First Fruits to bring operation to vacant Marion plant

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By DAN KEGLEY/Staff

A local businessman has become the latest private citizen to boost the county's industrial employment.

Ernie Sullins, known for his clothing stores in the region, is credited by the principals of First Fruits Beverage Company LLC for their decision to bring the vacant Pepsi plant on Marion's Washington Avenue back to life as a bottling facility.

"Ernie is the reason we're here," said Roger Catarino, president and COO of the new First Fruits venture. "He sold us on Marion, this location. He is our partner who worked out a doable plan for the facility."

That plan was taking shape Tuesday at the plant where inside, refurbishing is under way prior to the installation of bottling equipment. Outside, landscaping is being freshened, a chain-link fence removed, and the parking lot set for repaving.

Inside, Plant Manager Larry Grabman pointed to future office spaces and the production floor where the company will co-pack mainly organic beverages for a number of major beverage companies. The products will include teas, vitamin-enhanced and flavored waters and sports drinks. Some will be hot-filled in their bottles, and then cooled, while others will be cold filled. All will have low or no sugar content and will promote a healthy lifestyle, Catarino said.

Drink ingredients will be shipped to the plant, where local water will be used to make the products.

"The companies are trusting us with their brand," Catarino said, representing for First Fruits a great honor and equal responsibility.

The facility will be the company's sole location, Grabman said, and according to Catarino, plans for the site, already big, have grown recently. In addition

to the companies on board for co-packing of their products, an international company has asked First Fruits to become its major East Coast bottler, and another major brand is looking at the plant as a distribution hub, Catarino said.

Its location, adjacent to Interstate 81 and near Interstate 77, and the local water supply were other key factors in luring the company's leaders, who have a combined 125 years in the beverage industry, to Marion, Catarino said.

Sullins sweetened the deal by investing in the company, becoming a director and member of the limited liability corporation, and in providing Catarino a furnished weekday home away from his Columbia, S.C., home.

The package, enhanced by incentives offered by Virginia, won out over recruitment efforts by North Carolina and South Carolina to locate the company in those states, Catarino said.

"We're really excited about the deal," he said.

That deal means 20 to 30 people could be working on two production lines in the company's first 12 months of operation, Catarino said.

"We'll start with one line, one shift," Grabman said. "We've got to do the baby steps and then go from there."

Catarino expects job applications will be accepted starting in mid-July with production beginning in September or October. The facility is designed to accommodate three production lines, he said.

When a second line opens, as many as 50 people could have jobs at the plant, Catarino said.

Compensation will be competitive, Catarino said, with the company paying for employee health insurance after the first 30 days of employment and offering a dental plan. And like the drinks it bottles, First Fruits will focus on promoting healthy lifestyles among employees, he said. A dedicated break room will feature exercise equipment, and a wellness consultant will be on staff to work individually with employees on health and wellness plans meeting their personal goals.

"We want to create a family type atmosphere," Catarino said.

Among the first things Catarino shares about the company is that it is, without apology, Christian-based. Grabman said the name is a reference to

Deuteronomy.

"First Fruits comes from scripture," Catarino said. "We will be taking a certain amount of money per case and contributing it to local ministries." Each work day will begin with non-mandatory devotions for employees who want to participate, he said.

"We're trying to be good corporate citizens," Catarino said. "We are Christian-based and we are very open about that. We feel very blessed to be given the opportunity to work for and give back to the community."

A large conference room with attached kitchenette at the front of the plant will be available to the community for gatherings by churches and other groups, he said.

First Fruits will distribute drinks to convenience and grocery stores within a 700-mile radius and the truck drivers who haul its products will have a lounge with amenities in addition to the indoor docks that protect both people and products from the elements during loading.

"It's going to be the Taj Mahal of the beverage industry when it opens," said Jack Tally, executive vice president and chief operations officer.

The company will also focus on the health of the planet, according to Catarino who said everything used in manufacturing and shipping that can be recycled will be, and that company officials will work to find a market for glass, not locally accepted for recycling.

"We're going to run the boiler as efficiently as possible to reduce our carbon footprint," Grabman said. "We're going to be as green as possible."

First Fruits has emphasized using local resources in getting the plant ready for production.

"Where possible, we're doing business in every respect with local people," Catarino said, listing insurance, refurbishing and landscaping services among those purchased in the community.

Ernie Sullins joins private businesswoman Heather Luttrell of Chilhowie in bringing industry back to idle plants. Luttrell brokered a deal with American Wood Fibers a year ago to expand its Sugar Grove operation into a long-idle textile plant her family owns near Seven Mile Ford.

The Pepsi plant was idled in 2005 when the company moved operations into a new facility in Wytheville.

Sullins bought the building the same year and now, after finding a manufacturer that can use it, remains involved in the start-up preparations. He breezed through the plant Tuesday morning, pausing momentarily from his efforts to streamline laboratory analysis of the spring water the company will use.

“It’s not going to be a chore to work for First Fruits, but it will be a privilege,” said Sullins.

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