

Kia's hiring

Starting pay range of \$14.90-\$23.50 an hour expected to attract thousands

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It was a moment nearly two years in the making Tuesday, and one that thousands of job prospects have been anxiously awaiting.

With a yank, Byung Mo Ahn, president of Kia Motors Manufacturing Georgia Inc., pulled down a banner on the wall behind him, uncovering the words: "Now hiring!"

"So now Kia is actually coming. I hope many people apply to get the jobs," the South Korean executive said before leaving a news conference podium at West Central Georgia Technical College in LaGrange, Ga., about 45 minutes north of Columbus.

Apply they are expected to do -- but only online via www.kiajobsingorgia.com. The application deadline is Feb. 7.

Preliminary estimates from the Georgia Department of Labor indicate as many as 30,000 people will take part in the scramble to fill roughly 2,500 jobs up for grabs at the Kia auto assembly plant being built in West Point, Ga., off Interstate 85 between LaGrange and the Alabama state line. It's the automaker's first such facility in North America.

Another 3,000 or so auto-related jobs are expected to be created by parts suppliers clustering in the vicinity to do business with the factory.

Several hundred residents, state officials and company executives gathered inside the Callaway Center for the hiring launch spawned by a March 2006 agreement between Gov. Sonny Perdue and Seoul, South Korea-based Hyundai-Kia Automotive Group, parent company of Kia Motors Corp. The signing ended fierce competition between several Southeastern states to land the factory.

On Tuesday, Ken Stewart, commissioner of the Georgia Department of Economic Development, ticked off the dizzying numbers behind the project -- a \$1.2 billion investment, nearly 2,200 acres, production of 300,000 vehicles per year, and a \$4 billion economic impact for the state.

But the numbers that really mattered at the moment were the 2,500 jobs created and the hourly wages that will be paid to those working at the 2.4 million-square-foot facility.

The pay range for production "team members" will be \$14.90 to \$23.50 per hour, while maintenance and tool and die employees will be paid \$20.80 per hour to start, topping out at \$27 per hour. A rotating shift premium will add \$1 per hour.

"Performance expectations will be high at KMMG," said Randy Jackson, director of human resources at the Kia factory. "Each team member will be encouraged to contribute their knowledge, experience and ideas to equip KMMG in growing our organization. The KMMG plant will be made a friendly and productive atmosphere where each team member will be treated with dignity and respect."

Better opportunities

Kenneth Spearman, David Curry and Wykethia Blackmon all are hoping to become a part of that atmosphere. The West Georgia Tech students and LaGrange residents were on hand Tuesday, working on their own resumés as media swarmed around them for interviews.

"I'm taking automotive manufacturing technology, basically trying to get a job with Kia. That way I can improve on my financial status," said Spearman, 34, who now works at a nearby Wal-Mart Supercenter for \$10.30 per hour. The divorced man has three young children.

"I just want to get my foot in the door, so I'm going for production. But I've been maintenance all of my life," said Curry, 48, a husband and father who relocated from Florida and worries that his age might work against him in the hiring process. "I'm hoping it doesn't hurt me, but I don't know."

Blackmon, meanwhile, said she likes manufacturing, having worked with a Ford parts supplier until the plant shut down. The wife, 26, and mother of three is looking to replace a pre-school teaching job paying \$7 an hour. And she's not intimidated about being one of a handful of females in her class.

"I think this will be a good opportunity for me," she said. "Being a woman, it doesn't bother me that a lot of men will probably be in that field. I feel positive about myself, that I'm able to do it."

Though applications are being taken strictly via the Internet, the Georgia Department of Labor looks to play a major role. Labor Commissioner Michael Thurmond said his 53 career centers across the state -- including the Columbus office at 700 Veterans Parkway -- have set aside computers specifically to assist those seeking work with Kia.

He asked that those interested in receiving assistance contact a call center in Atlanta to set up an appointment. The number is 1-877-365-5421.

Kia expects to select 5,000 individuals from the initial pool of applications for the next step in the hiring process, which will be interviews and background checks.

The Kia training center, developed with help from the Georgia Quick Start program, should open in March, with hiring of production and maintenance workers beginning in April.

The Kia factory is scheduled to begin production in November 2009. The redesigned 2010 Sorento, a mid-size sports utility vehicle, is to be made there.