

Summerville plant bucking trend in boat industry

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While most boat makers have seen sales fall off in the face of high fuel prices, a French watercraft manufacturer with a local plant has found a silver, er, rubber lining.

Demand has soared for the lightweight, rubber-bottomed boats made in Summerville by Zodiac of North America Inc., and as a result, the company plans to expand the operation.

The investment will likely double Zodiac's local work force and create temporary construction jobs while it adds on to its 40,000-square-foot plant on Deming Way.

The project shows that some companies can thrive despite tough economic times, said vice president Howard French, citing record sales at recent boat show in Florida. "In a bad economy, with the marine industry struggling, we had our best show," French said.

The Paris-based company makes traditional fiberglass boats that are lined on the outside with an inflatable tube. The padding makes the vessel lighter so it sits higher on the water, causing it to use less fuel.

French cited a study that found Zodiac boats use about half the fuel of a conventional power boat. "In Europe, they're the most popular form of boating because they're light and they don't require a big pickup truck to pull them."

The expansion project will nearly double the company's workforce to 66 employees. Zodiac also plans to build additional manufacturing and office space, bringing the facility's size up to 87,000 square feet.

The company expects to build about 1,000 boats next year, up from the 700 boats projected for this year. Workers will make two models of watercraft: a typical fishing boat — part of the company's Pro series line — and a small tender that's used to ferry passengers from large yachts to land.

Zodiac began its South Carolina operations in late 2005 when it arranged for Scout Boats to build their models. But both companies grew so quickly, French said, that Zodiac officials later decided to rent out a nearby warehouse and hire their own workers.

Zodiac also was drawn to the availability of raw manufacturing materials that stems from the presence of other boat manufacturers, such as Scout, Key West Boats Inc. in Ridgeville and Sea Fox Boats near Moncks Corner.