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# AFG Wipes becoming a staple in Reidsville, Rockingham County

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By MARY DOLAN Staff writer

A "Best of Reidsville 2009" plaque awarded by the U.S. Chamber of Commerce is one of the only items hanging from the walls in the small front office at Albaad USA's AFG Wipes plant in Reidsville. The 2010 follow-up award for the same distinction has yet to be hung; rather, it sits on a desk waiting to take its position on the wall.

## AFG Wipes becoming a staple in Reidsville, Rockingham County

Albaad USA's AFG Wipes manufactures wet wipes for a variety of uses, packing them and shipping them to customers in the United States, Canada and South America.

At AFG Wipes, about 200 people produce 180,000 tubs, tubes and packages of non-woven textile cleansing wipes each day. The plant manufactures wipes for babies, for cosmetics removal, for cleaning and for adult personal hygiene.

AFG Wipes is the lone location that makes up Albaad USA's presence in the United States. Albaad, Inc. is headquartered in Israel, with plants there, in Germany and here in Reidsville.

In the local plant, which houses four production lines, wipes are manufactured daily and sent to the company's customers, who tend to be primarily in the United States, Canada and South America. Three of the company's bigger customers are WalMart, Shopko (a retail chain in the West) and CVS.

The plant receives weekly shipments of large spools of dry fabric which then goes through the process of being cut into smaller ribbons of material, moistened, stacked and packed into one of the three packages in which it is distributed: plastic tubes, tub-like plastic boxes or thin wrapping.

When Albaad was first seeking to establish itself on U.S. soil, Reidsville faced stiff competition from other spots in North Carolina in courting the manufacturing company, according to Human Resources Manager Charles Milks. But the incentives offered locally were enough for the city to prevail.

Graham Pervier, president of the Rockingham County Partnership for Economic and

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Tourism Development, said those incentives were offered hinging upon phases of development by AFG Wipes. For the initial phase, the one that helped secure the plant for Rockingham County, more than \$2 million in incentives were offered by the city of Reidsville and Rockingham County – some to be distributed over time.

Local officials gave Albaad USA the property, 32 acres valued at \$30,000 an acre, for a total of \$960,000 in assistance. The city reimbursed the company \$617,000 for site preparation. And the county offered incentives totaling \$382,000 to be distributed over five years, while the city agreed to a similar incentives package worth \$403,000 over that same period.

Pervier said the over-time figures are probably slightly less than that because, in order to receive that funding, Albaad USA had to hold up its terms of the original agreement, which included an initial investment by the company of \$8 million in the building, \$7 million in machinery and equipment and the hiring of 120 workers by the end of 2005. Thirty more jobs were to be added by the end of 2006. But, Pervier said, the company did not meet all its initial deadlines.

The first couple of years AFG Wipes was in operation were tougher than expected, and the contracts didn't come rolling in as hoped. This meant a delay in added equipment and workforce, which also hindered the receipt of state grants that were awarded to help allure the manufacturer.

Albaad USA had received two noteworthy state grants, a \$500,000 One North Carolina Fund Grant and a Job Development Investment Grant, with amounts to be given each year for the span of 10 years.

But both of those grants required certain levels of hiring as well, according to Deborah Barnes with the N.C. Department of Commerce. The company ended up only receiving \$250,000 of the One North Carolina Fund Grant and about \$90,000 total for the years 2005 and 2006 from the Job Development Investment Grant. Without being able to meet the annual targets of that grant, it did not receive amounts in 2007 or 2008. Barnes said 2009 numbers are currently being reviewed.

The manufacturer has come a long way in the last six or seven years. Before the addition of AFG Wipes to the Reidsville Industrial Park, the area was "nothing but woods," Milks said. But the plant went up, the jobs were doled out and production started in the summer of 2004.

Initially starting out with only about 100 employees, Albaad USA has since doubled that workforce.

New leadership will soon be guiding Reidsville's non-woven textile plant. Albaad USA's current CEO Dan Mesika will soon be replaced by William Thomas, likely sometime this summer, with Mesika planning to move back home to Israel.

"We're pretty excited," Milks said of what's to come.

Milks acknowledged the community has been kind to Albaad USA. And, in turn, the wet wipes manufacturing company has sought to return the favor.

During a recent March of Dimes walk, Milks said AFG Wipes had the largest representation of any group there, helping raise a little more than \$4,000.

The company has also adopted Hospice as an organization it has decided to help, by way of donating wipes. But wipe donation, which the company keeps under the radar and doesn't boast about, is a regular occurrence, Milks said. Each month, AFG Wipes donates excess product from its production runs to a variety of places, including soldiers stationed overseas, the Salvation Army in Eden, a Knights of Columbus group, the Autism Society of

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Su	Mo	Tu	We	Th	Fr	Sa
					1	2
3	4	5	6	7	8	9
10	11	12	13	14	15	16
17	18	19	20	21	22	23
24	25	26	27	28		
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North Carolina, and the list goes on.

The same standards the organization sets for itself in showing its appreciation to the community hold true within the facility as well.

Milks bragged that upon the most recent Occupational Safety and Health Administration visit, the plant received no violations. He said cleanliness of operation is paramount, citing the use of hairnets and lab coats throughout the building.

And in exciting news for the company, AFG Wipes was recently awarded another One North Carolina Fund Grant by the governor's office for its efforts to expand in this state. The grant, for \$350,000, will help the plant to hire as many as 100 additional workers.

But before that can happen, Milks said the plant has to address equipment update needs and ready itself for the addition in workforce. The company hopes to hire within the coming year.

"We're looking forward to that," Milks said.

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