

Smith-Midland wins \$59,000 state job-training grant

Jobs investment program helps maintain competitive edge

BY STEVE CAMPBELL
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Smith-Midland Corp. received a \$59,000 grant from the Commonwealth of Virginia Friday to help defray the cost of employee training at the Midland-based manufacturer.

The company makes concrete barriers, walls and structural components at the plant on Route 28 in Midland.

The 50-year-old family-owned firm competes against companies up and down the East Coast and Canada, and to maintain a competitive edge, invests millions in new equipment and processes.

The company last year installed a new batch plant that mixes the concrete that goes into everything from highway barriers to high-rise exteriors. That equipment required new computer software to run and extensive training for employees to operate.

Also, Smith-Midland provides safety training to its workers, particularly crane and rigging operators. All that innovation and training costs money.

"We are trying to do two things," said company President Ashley Smith. "We're trying to maintain where we are, but we also want to grow."

Smith-Midland came to the attention of the Virginia Jobs Investment Program of the commonwealth's Department of Business Assistance through the efforts of Fauquier County Economic Development Director Talmage Reeves and county Business Coordinator Beverly Pullen.

"We knew there were programs like this out there, but we didn't know how to access them," Smith said.

Reeves and Pullen guided Smith-Midland through the grant application process. The company is one of five in the county that the economic development team is working with to channel state grant money.

At a brief ceremony Friday at the Midland headquarters, Peter Su, assistant secretary of commerce and trade with the Virginia Department of

Business Assistance, presented an oversized replica of a check for \$59,000 to help offset the cost of training workers.

Growing a business is tough, he said, in an environment marked by a stagnant economy and persistently high unemployment.

"We really appreciate Smith-Midland for providing these job opportunities here in Fauquier County," Su said.

Created in 1966, the Virginia Job Investment Program is one of the two oldest economic development tools in the state, according to Su.

Smith-Midland's innovations continue almost daily. Currently the company is preparing to test a new type of highway barrier.

"It's a new bolt-down highway barrier system that we've developed and are testing to make sure it meets federal highway requirements," said Matthew Smith, vice president of sales and marketing.

According to Ashley Smith, once approved, the new barrier system technology will be licensed to other concrete manufacturers across the nation.

"So that money's going to come back here to Midland," Smith said.

"That's just a small example of how a small manufacturing company in Virginia can spread across the U.S.," he said.

According to Su, the grant program doesn't just target aggressively growing companies like Smith-Midland, but also makes funds available to "settled" companies that might have won a new contract or received a patent for a new process and need to retrain an existing workforce.

Smith-Midland practices "lean manufacturing," a critical self-examination that helps the company strip away waste in all aspects of the manufacturing process.

"Lean manufacturing is looking at all the processes, the way you do everything from how you take the sale, how you process the sale, to the making it, delivering it and collecting the money and driving the waste out of those processes," Smith said.

The job investment grant will go a long way toward helping the company stay innovative and



Times-Democrat Staff Photos/Steve Campbell

JOB GENERATOR: Smith-Midland president and COO Ashley Smith gives Peter Su, assistant secretary of commerce and trade with the Virginia Department of Business Development, a tour of the company's Midland factory Friday after receiving a grant for job training from the state.



THE MONEY MAN: Peter Su, from the Virginia Department of Business, presents a check for \$59,000 for job training to Smith-Midland President Ashley Smith Friday at the company's headquarters in Midland, while Chris Kemp looks on.

competitive, according to Smith. "[Training] is both a building block and part of growing

the business," Smith said. "We would expect it to help us be more competitive."



WHERE IT ALL STARTED: Ron Tignor, interim director of Virginia Jobs Investment Program, left, Fauquier County Department of Economic Development Business Coordinator Beverly Pullen, Talmage Reeves, county economic development director, Chris Kemp, director of continuous improvements at Smith-Midland, Ashley Smith, president of Smith-Midland and Virginia Assistant Secretary of Commerce and Trade Peter Su talk about Smith-Midland's very first product, a concrete cattle guard, during a tour of the plant in Midland Friday.