

The Post and Courier

Here to stay

ArborGen to build permanent Lowcountry headquarters

By [Katy Stech](#)
The Post and Courier
Wednesday, June 16, 2010

Ten years after its founding, ArborGen Inc. has decided to lay down roots in the Lowcountry with a permanent headquarters.

The Summerville company, which sells pine seedlings to timber companies while scientists work to find the fastest-growing trees, will build a 13.5-acre campus in rural Dorchester County. With more room, company officials will be able to add about 25 employees to its 174-worker payroll.

Elected officials and economic development leaders gathered Tuesday in downtown Summerville to celebrate the expansion, which company officials said was needed after the company naturally grew despite the economic slowdown.



file/staff

A lab tech at ArborGen in Summerville sorts through trays of tree embryos. This is part of the process of growing trees from cells to saplings.

"It's one thing to grow when times are easy; it's something else to grow when times are tough," president Barbara Wells told the group.

The company's proposed 55,000-square-foot office building and 35,000-square-foot greenhouse would be built in MeadWestvaco Corp.'s proposed East Edisto community, a 72,000-acre stretch of forestland between Ravenel and

Summerville along the Edisto River.

The headquarters, scheduled to open next fall, would be the first commercial tenant in the development's planned commercial park near Summerville. The rural campus will have access to water and sewer thanks to a \$2.5 million federal grant secured by Dorchester County officials last fall.

County officials requested the money, which was available through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009, last year when federal agencies asked for a list of so-called shovel-ready projects that could jump-start the economy.

The money helped company officials settle on building their headquarters here instead of in Raleigh's Research Triangle Park, where it was looking to locate a few years ago.

"It shows if you make an investment in the infrastructure, companies will come," said Mitchell Bohannon, chairman of the Charleston Regional Development Alliance, a business recruitment group.

The most genetically desirable trees grow tall and round quickly, but have few branches. ArborGen researchers are trying to develop a Loblolly pine tree that grows to its full height in 15 to 20 years, about five years sooner than the traditionally grown tree, said spokeswoman Nancy Hood.

The company sells about 250 million trees each year, mostly to companies that harvest trees for lumber or paper products. Hood said alternative energy companies are increasingly buying trees to cut down and burn for fuel.

"With the president's initiative on green energy, one thing we're looking at carefully is how trees could be used as a biomass feedstock for (power plants)," she said.

Workers grow the seedlings at six nursery fields located throughout the Southeast.

Three major timber companies -- International Paper, MeadWestvaco and New Zealand-based Rubicon -- combined their dwindling research staffs to form ArborGen 10 years ago.

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