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Expert Machine & Fabrication Company to expand Dillon County manufacturing

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From staff reports

COLUMBIA — Expert Machine & Fabrication LLC is expanding its operations in Dillon County. The company will be investing \$2.6 million in the expansion, adding an expected 25 new jobs over five years in Latta.

Founded in 1999, the family-owned Expert Machine & Fabrication manufactures products primarily for the housing industry. The company also serves the military, manufacturing and electrical industries. To meet increased customer demand from these industries, Expert Machine & Fabrication has decided to relocate to a larger facility in Latta.

"Dillon County is quickly becoming a place where businesses grow and people prosper. We are very happy to be a part of the growing Latta community and providing more jobs for its citizens," said Expert Machine & Fabrication owners Teddie and Elizabeth Williams in an

announcement.

The new 21,000-square-foot facility at 109 Academy St. in Latta is nearly triple the size of the existing site, allowing the company the opportunity to upgrade its existing equipment and add new equipment to its operations. The addition of 25 new employees over the next five years will more than triple its workforce to 36.

"It's exciting to see a local, family-owned company, like Expert Machine & Fabrication,

grow after doing business in South Carolina for 15 successful years," said Gov. Nikki Haley. "The company's decision to invest and create new jobs in Dillon County is a reason to celebrate in the local community, and we look forward to watching them continue to succeed here moving forward."

"South Carolina continues to lead the nation's manufacturing renaissance, and today's announcement by Expert Machine & Fabrication LLC reinforces that

notion," said state Secretary of Commerce Bobby Hitt. "We congratulate Expert Machine & Fabrication on all of their success and look forward to supporting them as they continue to thrive in our state."

Hiring for the new positions is expected to begin soon. Anyone interested in obtaining more information on the open positions or the company itself should visit the business or call 843-752-0046.

Dillon County Council Chairman T.F. "Buzzy" Finklea Jr. welcomed the news.

"Here in Dillon County our goal is very simple, and that is for every single citizen who wants a job to have one," he said. "We are extremely pleased with the announcement today because it represents more jobs and more opportunities for our citizens."

The Rural Infrastructure Authority has approved a \$75,000 grant to Dillon County to assist with the cost of real property improvements.



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Haley opposes borrowing bill; sponsors tout benefits

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COLUMBIA — Gov. Nikki Haley is accusing the leader of a powerful House committee of running up South Carolina's credit card with a proposal borrowing \$500 million for building projects across the state.

Haley repeatedly singled out Ways and Means

Chairman Brian White while opposing a measure his committee advanced last week.

She called Wednesday for the House to stop the state's first bonding bill in 15 years.

But White says the proposal finances needed projects at today's construction prices while bond rates remain near

historic lows, so the credit card analogy doesn't work.

GOP Rep. Chip Limehouse called the measure a smart budgeting tool to meet needs without raising taxes.

Fellow Republican Rep. Kenny Bingham notes it won't increase what the state spends on interest because old debt is rotating off.

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Bill rekindles debate over fire district

Lowe's proposal clarifies current legislation,
changes Florence County lawsuit's prospects

BY GAVIN JACKSON
Morning News
gjackson@florencenews.com

FLORENCE — Some of the same Florence County legislators who sponsored legislation that created the West Florence Fire special-purpose district last year and called it legally solid have introduced a bill to amend that law ahead of a courtroom showdown.

"It certainly would clarify any confusion from original intentions. I don't think it alters what we're trying to do," said the bill's sponsor, Rep. Phillip Lowe, R-Florence. "That was a hurried bill last time; if there were imperfections we should get a bill to be clear to (the) county council what we're talking about."

County officials say the bill, filed last week, illustrates how weak the current law, Act 183, is and is an attempt to strengthen it before a judge hears the county's suit against the district that Act 183 created last May.

The county asserts that the West Florence Fire special-purpose district was created to prevent taxpayers in the wealthy, densely populated area of west Florence County from being hit with a tax increase to fund fire service improvements throughout the county.

"This will improve some fire service to a community on the edge of Darlington County where it splits with Florence County. It will provide clarity to the special-purpose district to serve that area so we don't have fire trucks and emergency services wondering which county these people should be served by."



REP. PHILLIP LOWE,
R-Florence

County attorney Malloy McEachin expected a county lawsuit to go before a judge in March, but now thinks that date will be delayed. Furthermore, if the bill is passed in its current form, it would weaken part of the county's assertions.

"The bill may slow things down before (the lawsuit) is heard," McEachin said. "The bill, substantively, changes Act 183 so it could very well delay it."

Some of the changes in the bill address points made by the county in a

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Debate

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lawsuit it filed last September, such as the district's boundaries and annexation concerns, and it even adds several more parcels in Darlington County to the three original lots in Act 183 — which are closer to Darlington's Palmetto Rural Fire than West Florence Fire. Act 183 included part of another county, Darlington, to make it constitutional.

"This will improve some fire service to a community on the edge of Darlington County where it splits with Florence County," Lowe said. "It will provide clarity to the special-purpose district to serve that area so we don't have fire trucks and emergency services wondering which county these people should be served by."

"We also want to make it clear that if properties were annexed into the city that we would not be taxing them from west Florence; they would only get a tax bill from the city at that point."

More than 100 properties were annexed into the city last year.

The bill, H. 3670, was introduced on Feb. 17 and is co-sponsored by Reps. Roger Kirby, D-Florence, and Robert Williams, D-Darlington. It resides in the House Ways and Means Committee after Rep. Jerry Govan, D-Orangeburg, objected to Lowe's request to put it on the House's calendar with-

out reference.

Both Govan and Lowe said the move was political and not related to the merits of the bill.

Lowe said the bill likely won't make it out of committee until the budget is finished.

That trajectory differs from bill H. 5225, which later became Act 183.

Introduced on May 7, days before the county council approved its consolidated fire protection district, it was placed on the calendar without reference and several unsuccessful attempts by Florence Democrats Rep. Terry Alexander and then Rep. Lester Branham Jr. (Kirby's predecessor) to stop the bill culminated in a 50-38 vote that sent

it to the Senate eight days later.

The bill sailed through the Senate, and Gov. Nikki Haley signed it May 28.

McEachin said the changes still don't address one of the county's primary arguments that the special purpose district provides services where services are already being provided.

"The act violates a fundamental principle in South Carolina and most jurisdictions against having two overlapping government bodies both exercising the same governmental power and serving the same governmental function," the county's lawsuit reads.

McEachin said the proposed legislation takes more property from Darlington County's tax

base and gives equipment and land, purchased with Florence County taxpayer dollars, to the special-purpose district without financial compensation to Florence.

"If it said pay compensation for it (land and equipment) that's one thing," McEachin said. "But to outright say the property goes to the special-purpose district and to not reimburse citizens of Florence County what they paid for it, that's like the old supply bill days."

That includes property on Hoffmeyer Road where a new fire station will be built, funded by the capital project sales tax.

The bill strikes language requiring an agreement between the county and district commission.

Many critics of the county's plan, which consolidated the county's six rural fire taxing districts, point out that South Lynches Fire District in southern Florence County was not included in the consolidated district and that it too is its own special-purpose district.

Sam Brockington, county fire and rescue services coordinator and former South Lynches fire chief, points out that when that district was formed in 1983, it was in reaction to poor county fire service funding for the southern, rural part of the county. Furthermore, it became the only fire service for part of northern Williamsburg County.

The council sought to





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raise the tax rate in the West Florence Fire District from 8 mills to a unified 22.4 millage rate in its consolidated fire protection district, primarily to fund full and part-time daytime firefighters for the volunteer-dependent stations. That rate was determined by the council after attempting to work with local legislators and reviewing other options. That unified rates, which varied from eight mills in the West Florence Fire District to 38 mills in Johnsonville; rates that were all tied to Act 388, which only allows tax-rate increases equal to the consumer price index plus the increase in population.

Since West Florence left the consolidated district, the council adjusted the tax rate to 27.5 mills on the remaining districts, which was a bigger hit for Sardis-Timmonsville and a slight increase for Hannah-Salem-Friendfield and Howe Springs. The 3.5 mills of debt service were rolled into a bond anticipation note.

Similarly, the West Florence Fire District commission voted to raise district millage to 12.7 mills,

something it had been prevented from doing for years due to Act 388, despite rapid growth in the area.

In June, the county filed a lawsuit seeking original jurisdiction with the state Supreme Court and an injunction. However, the county was stuck suing three county offices (treasurer, auditor and election commission) instead of the special purpose district since the district's new board wasn't set to be elected and formed until Sept. 2.

In August, the court denied the county's request for original jurisdiction because it felt the county's rights were not materially prejudiced by the court not hearing the case over a circuit court first; even though a special election to elect members to the new West Florence Fire Commission was less than a month away.

County officials also felt that a sham lawsuit, as they called it, lodged by Rebecca Crawford and John C. Floyd challenging County Council's authority to create the unified fire protection district played a role in deterring the Su-

preme Court from taking the case. Shortly after the high court denied original jurisdiction, the Crawford suit was heard before a Charleston judge, who poked several holes in attorney Jay Jordan's appeal.

Before another hearing could be held in September, Jordan dropped the appeal. Five days later the West Florence Fire District commissioners were elected.

With the commission formed, the council reinforced the county to pursue legal action against the district. McEachin and lawyer Steve Matthews adjusted the original lawsuit and filed a new one against the five commissioners, the district and the state in September.

Judge J.C. Nicholson Jr., a retired 10th Circuit Court judge, was selected to hear the Crawford appeal, due to the political sensitivity surrounding the case.

The county, Jordan (representing the fire district) and the state attorney general's office are expected to go before Nicholson in March.

An exact date has not been announced.



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Senate includes gun ban in domestic violence penalties

The Associated Press

COLUMBIA — In a state where gun rights tend to be fiercely guarded, the South Carolina Senate on Wednesday agreed to take firearms away from many people convicted of criminal domestic violence.

The gun ban would still require a judge's approval for the least serious offenses. A provision

adding that requirement cleared the way for passage of the bill to strengthen domestic violence penalties across the board. The measure passed 38-3 after nearly two weeks of debate.

It still must pass the House, which is considering a domestic violence bill with a less stringent gun ban. But lawmakers in both chambers appear ready to take some kind of action to curb do-

mestic violence, as South Carolina frequently ranks among the worst in the nation in the number of people killed that way.

"Solving this problem is as much about changing hearts and minds as legislation. But this is a

very important first step," said Sen. Greg Hembree, who helped put together the bill.

The Senate bill would create three different degrees of crimi-

nal domestic violence, depending on the amount of violence involved and whether there are previous convictions. Currently, prosecutors only have two options, which vary widely depending on the severity of the offense.

Much of the debate in this heavily conservative state centered on the gun ban. Opponents were worried that allow-

ing the ban to be automatic for all convictions might take away weapons from people who didn't deserve to lose their gun rights.

The bill would still automatically ban offenders from owning guns for 10 years if convicted of the two most serious degrees. Under an amendment that cleared the way for passage, a

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third-degree domestic violence conviction would lead to a five-year gun ban, but only if a judge approved.

Sen. Chip Campsen, R-Isle of Palms, backed the amendment, saying lawmakers couldn't foresee every circumstance and should allow judges some discretion. The amendment passed by two votes.

"It's a smidge disappointing on the amendment, but that's just a minor policy difference," said Senate Judiciary Chairman Larry Martin, R-Pickens, who helped make the bill a priority this session.

The federal government has a

walls of your house, there was no need to get involved," said Hembree, R-Little River.

More than 36,000 people annually report a domestic violence incident to law enforcement agencies around South Carolina, according to the state attorney general's office.

Lawmakers are considering other ways of combating domestic violence, like removing a requirement that married couples wait a year to get divorced and requiring education in schools about domestic violence and abuse.

In an often contentious debate, the Senate's only female member took public exception to a joke made over dinner one evening by Greenville Republican Sen. Tom Corbin, an opponent of the

similar gun ban, but supporters said this assures the law will be enforced here.

The bill should get a final procedural vote next week, and lawmakers in both chambers have voiced support for it. State Attorney General Alan Wilson and local prosecutors want the new penalties. Gov. Nikki Haley has created a task force to study domestic violence that includes members from law enforcement, courts, churches, health care, social services and cosmetology.

Hembree, who served 25 years as a prosecutor, said he thinks South Carolina is quickly getting less tolerant of abusers.

"When I started, I remember judges and law enforcement thinking if it happened in the four

provision. Sen. Katrina Shealy, R-Lexington, said his remark that women were made from a lesser cut of meat than men was demeaning.

On Tuesday on the Senate floor, Shealy told the story of her sister's 30-year abusive relationship in public for the first time. That relationship included physical and mental abuse and ended with her brother-in-law killing himself on the hood of his estranged wife's car. A suicide note said he planned to kill her, then himself, but Shealy's sister was not harmed.

"It is a strong bill although we did not get everything we wanted," said Shealy, R-Lexington, in a statement. "It is a start in the right direction for South Carolina."



Title: **As House and Senate discuss roads, Haley sends veto reminder**
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As House and Senate discuss roads, Haley sends veto reminder

Gov. Nikki Haley is reminding House and Senate committees that she has her veto pen handy as they discuss their respective plans for more money for South Carolina roads.

Haley sent letters Tuesday to the House and Senate telling them she would veto bills in each chamber as they stand today because they don't provide enough tax breaks.

Haley's proposal would raise the state's gas tax by 10 cents while lowering income tax by 2 percentage points.

The House plan being discussed Tuesday in a subcommittee lowers the gas tax while raising the sales tax on fuel to raise about \$400 million.

The Senate Finance Committee's plan would raise the gas tax by 10 cents, tie it to inflation and increase a number of fees to raise about \$800 million.



Title: **Congressmen have varied views on Atlantic drilling**
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Congressmen have varied views on Atlantic drilling

Associated Press

CHARLESTON, S.C. — The five congressmen representing coastal districts in the Carolinas reflect the opposing views in states where both governors are strong advocates of offshore drilling and almost 20 coastal communities oppose the idea.

The federal Bureau of Ocean and Energy Management is now taking comment on what should be included in environmental studies to decide whether areas in the Atlantic are opened to oil and gas development later this decade.

Gov. Nikki Haley is a member of the Outer Continental Shelf Governors Coalition, which North Carolina Gov. Pat McCrory chairs. The group's mission statement says it works to "influence a sensible path forward for the

development of America's offshore energy resources." Drilling proponents say it can help reduce dependence on foreign energy and create jobs and revenue.

Hilton Head Island is the latest coastal community to go on record opposing drilling, joining 18 others in the Carolinas. Opponents worry oil spills could harm

the environment and coastal tourism.

A look at where the five coastal congressmen stand:

U.S. Rep. Walter Jones, R-N.C.

Jones' district runs from Greenville to the Outer Banks and southwest to Wilmington. He says any decision on drilling off North Carolina should be made by the people of the state — not Washington — and the state should receive a fair share of energy revenue. He urged the Bureau of Ocean and Energy Management to hold an additional public hearing this month so more people could be heard. They were. Some 670 people attended last Monday in Kill Devil Hills, the most for any public meeting the agency has held.

U.S. Rep. G.K. Butterfield, D-N.C.

Butterfield's district reaches from Durham then along the state's northern edge to the western end of Albemarle Sound. He and 52 other members of Congress wrote Interior Secretary Sally Jewell this month asking the

Atlantic be put off-limits to drilling. They noted drilling would "threaten the economic and ecological productivity" of states

and at current consumption rates, Atlantic offshore oil would provide only five months of energy.

U.S. Rep. David Rouzer, R-N.C.

Rouzer's district runs from near Raleigh south to the coast and the South Carolina line. He supports oil and gas exploration saying increased production will keep prices low, encouraging growth and meaning less oil revenue for the Islamic State and other terror groups. Government revenue will also help pay for coastal infrastructure, he says.

U.S. Rep. Tom Rice, R-S.C.

Rice's north coast district includes Myrtle Beach. He favors oil exploration. "I don't know

how you can make an intelligent decision about what you're going to do if you don't know what's there," he says. But he

wonders if offshore drilling is practical with prices low and drilling operations on land being closed down. He says states should have a say in where offshore drilling is allowed. "I have always put a condition on my assent that it not be near tourism areas," he says.

U.S. Rep Mark Sanford, R-S.C.

Sanford's district runs from northeast of Charleston to the Georgia state line. A strong conservationist, he has opposed drilling in the past. "My perspective continues to evolve," he says. He sees no problem with exploring to at least see how much oil is offshore. "That's where we have been but not further than that."

Title: **Congressmen have varied views on Atlantic drilling**

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Rice



Jones



Rouzer



Sanford