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Pamlico boatmaker awarded contract for new Savannah ferry

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A Pamlico County boatmaker was able to rehire some of its unemployed workers after it was awarded a contract for the construction of a passenger ferry that will be used by residents and visitors of the city of Savannah.

Custom Steel Boats Inc. of Merritt signed an approximately \$1.5 million contract with the Savannah, Ga.-based Chatham Area Transit Authority in August to build a 67-foot, S-Class 149-passenger ferry, according to a news release.

The ferry will carry passengers across the Savannah River between the city's downtown and the Savannah International Trade & Convention Center, which is located on Hutchinson Island across the river from the city's downtown.

The project was paid for in part with federal stimulus dollars, and in part using a grant from the U.S. Department of Transportation Federal Highway Administration, said Bob Coffey, general manager of the trade and convention center.

"The timing couldn't be better for us," said Teresa Flowers, vice president of Custom Steel Boats of Merritt. "We were scared to lose the talent that we did have, so we knew we needed to get them back to work as soon as possible."

Flowers said the contract enabled the company to rehire five of its workers, and to hire two others. The company will also eventually be bringing back between 25 and 30 of its subcontractors, she said.

The company previously had to lay off workers due to a dearth of new boat contracts, Flowers said. Custom Steel Boats had launched a boat in 2009, and did not have a subsequent contract at that time.

"So at that point, we had to lay off most everybody," she said. "They've been unemployed, and it's great to have them back. They are our No. 1 asset."

The 29-year-old, family-owned company has historically been in the pleasure-boat side of the boat building industry, Flowers said. But because of the sluggish economy, she said, there was more commercial boat-building work being done.

The company has the capacity to work on a boat of this size, as the largest custom boat built by the company was a 90-foot aluminum house boat. She said Custom Steel Boats bid against seven other boat builders for the contract, which was awarded on March 12, and signed in August.

Construction started Oct. 6 after the vessel's design was completed by DeJong & Lebet Inc. of Jacksonville, Fla., and approved by the U.S. Coast Guard. The vessel was also computer-lofted by Boksa Marine Design of Lithia, Fla., according to the release. The first load of steel for the boat was delivered from Metals USA in Mobile, Ala., on Oct. 5.

"We are so blessed to have it in our yard," Flowers said.

Coffey said the ferry will be added to the Savannah River Ferry System fleet that handles about 550,000 passenger boardings per year. It will replace an older, 149-passenger ferry that runs alongside two other 100-passenger boats.

“The ferry is part of an integrated downtown transportation system that’s free to riders that comprises the water ferry, an electric hybrid street car which runs along the riverfront, and a free visitor shuttle bus that circulates around downtown Savannah,” Coffey said.

Andy Lebet, a naval architect with DeJong & Lebet Inc., said the boat is being built under U.S. Coast Guard certification. It is scheduled for completion in September of next year.

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