

Expansion under way at PGI site

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The expansion of Polymer Group Inc.'s Waynesboro plant is under way as the company begins construction of a new state-of-the-art spunmelt machine.

By methods kept under close wraps by the company, the machine is used to melt polypropylene plastic chips and shape them into disposable nonwoven fabrics, PGI spokesman Cliff Bridges said.

The North Carolina-based company produces nonwoven fabrics used in a wide variety of products such as diapers, surgical gowns and food packaging. Officials earlier this year announced a \$65-million expansion plan at PGI's Waynesboro plant.

"It's a most versatile technology," said Seshadri Ramkumar, associate professor of nonwoven materials at the Institute of Environmental and Human Health and manager of the nonwoven laboratory at Texas Tech University in Lubbock.

The nonwoven innovation in textile manufacturing, which has changed the production of medical bandages, wipes and diapers, saves on time and labor and relies on the latest technology, Ramkumar said.

The installation is part of the expansion of Waynesboro's 180,000-square-foot facility on Shenandoah Village Drive expected to be completed in the second half of 2011. The investment is set to create 41 jobs, for which hiring would begin by the end of the year, Bridges said.

Bridges said the technology allows PGI to create increasingly sterile nonwoven products for medical applications, such as gowns and masks used in emergency rooms.

"The technology is very clean, which allows for better infection control," he said. "Our fabrics are also noted for being thinner and lightweight. That's part of what makes us unique."

Ramkumar said nonwoven technology led to the emergence of reusable shopping bags now seen commonly in grocery stores.

"That is really becoming a blockbuster," he said. "Everyone wants to use them because they're better than paper or plastic bags that wear out after multiple uses. They're more recyclable, so greener."

An aggressive package of incentives lured the expansion to Waynesboro.

In addition to two state grants of \$750,000 from the Governor's Opportunity Fund and the Virginia Investment Partnership Program, Waynesboro officials offered incentives including 15 acres of gifted land, a tax rebate program for six years valued at \$1.75 million and a \$550,000 cash grant for site improvements. Waynesboro received a \$17-million federal recovery zone bond that can be used by PGI to finance the project.



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