

“Parts for Millions: Diamond Electric to celebrate 10 years”
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Eleanor – Workers at a Putnam county auto parts maker are preparing to celebrate its 10th anniversary in West Virginia later this month.

The nearly 200 workers at Diamond Electric make ignition coils used in Toyota, Chrysler and Ford engines. Company CEO Shigeji Ikenaga decided to build his second U.S. factory in the Eleanor Industrial Park in 1996. The facility has expanded three times since it opened in 1997. The initial five workers began making ignition coils for Chrysler in a 30,000-square-foot facility. The facility’s first expansion added a product line for Toyota in 2002, when plant workers began making coils for the automaker’s Georgetown, Ky., assembly plant

The plant expanded again in 2003 to make room for new Toyota, Chrysler and Ford product lines. The most recent project involved expanding the warehouse, which brought the building up to 112,000 square feet. The warehouse’s exterior was finished two months ago and the storage racks went up a few weeks ago. Politicians, company executives and workers will celebrate these expansions and the plant’s 10th anniversary during an event on July 31.

Assembly machine operator Connie Lovejoy has been impressed by all the changes during her eight years at the plant. “[It’s] kind of like job security,” she said. “Everybody’s got to drive.” Lovejoy has lived in Eleanor for about 40 years – all her life – and said Diamond’s presence has been good for the community.

Fellow assembly operator Bonnie Smith agrees. Smith was a convenience store cashier before coming to the plant on Nov. 10, 1997, and likes the plant’s people, money and work.

The majority of the company’s workers live in Putnam or Mason counties, said Human Resources Manager Cathy Davis. All the employees work full time and earn an average of \$11 an hour. Putnam County’s economic indicators have continued to improve since 1995. In a decade, the number of companies in the county has increased by 288 and the number of employed workers has gone up by 3,588, according to data from the West Virginia Bureau of Employment Programs.

The average weekly wage has increased almost \$100 after inflation in the past 10 years.

Director of Community Relations David Bagnall said, “Diamond likes to locate in smaller communities such as Eleanor where it can make an impact. The company has donated dictionaries for every third-grader in Putnam County and will announce some significant community support projects at its-July 31 celebration,” he said. “Absolutely

the best move and best decision our company has made is to locate in West Virginia,” Bagnall said. “Our workforce is excellent and we’ve had a really low turnover rate, which is so important in manufacturing.”

Five out of the first eight or nine people hired at the plant still work there, and the turnover rate is less than 6 percent, he said. The Eleanor facility is the larger of Diamond’s two U.S. facilities and is becoming the global company’s biggest corporate plant, edging out facilities in Hungary, Japan and China. West Virginia workers made a couple of hundred thousand coils in 1997 and are on track to make 10 million this year and 14 million in a few years. This year’s West Virginia sales should equal \$58 million.

While the company doesn’t have any plans for other additions, it will continue to grow and mature in its new space, Bagnall said. “I think it’s kind of like a child growing up,” he said. “We are making more higher-quality products than when we first started.

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