

# Electric Car Maker Reopens Plant In Downtrodden Elkhart

ELKHART, Ind. (AP) — An electric car maker plans to open a factory in a northern Indiana plant that once made parts for recreational vehicles.

State and local officials joined executives from Think North America for an official announcement Tuesday. The plant in Elkhart will be Think North America's first in the U.S. and provide much-needed jobs in a city that has been struggling since the RV industry collapsed during the recession.

Think chief executive officer Richard Canny drove into the Elkhart plant in an electric car built in Europe, got out, walked to a podium and declared a new era in manufacturing had arrived in the city.

"We decided we wanted to be somewhere where we could really make a difference," he said.

Think North America, a subsidiary of Norwegian-based Think Global, projects its new factory could have 415 full-time jobs by 2013. Think Global currently makes its compact, two-door electric passenger cars at a plant in Finland.

The company began looking in Elkhart after negotiations broke down last week with the owner of a property in the nearby town of Middlebury, said Tom Kemeny, Think North America's chief financial officer.

The Elkhart City Council gave initial approval Monday night to a 10-year tax abatement plan for the company.

Gov. Mitch Daniels took part in the formal announcement Tuesday afternoon at the former facility for PhilipsProducts, which made doors and windows for the RV industry. That plant, which had about 250 workers, closed last summer.

Think North America officials said they planned to start selling Think City electric cars in the U.S. later this year. The company expects production to start at the Elkhart factory in early 2011. The plant will eventually build more than 20,000 cars a year.

Barkley Garrett, the city's economic development director, said city officials worked through the weekend to complete the deal with the company after it ended talks for the Middlebury site.

"We're not poaching other communities' projects," Garrett said. "We knew our site was a backup site. We were not involved in negotiations until they contacted us."

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Two other companies are working on plans to make electric vehicles in nearby Wakarusa.

Navistar International Corp. plans to build all-electric delivery trucks this year with a \$39 million federal grant. Startup Electric Motors Corp. intends to make electric-hybrid drive trains to be installed in various vehicles, starting with a joint venture with Gulf Stream that would make light-duty electric trucks.

Elkhart County's unemployment rate peaked in March at 18.9 percent but has fallen steadily since, hitting 14.5 percent in November.

"I don't think it makes any difference who gets this company or where they go as long as they go in Elkhart County," County Council President John Leatherman said. "What we're trying to build here is an electric car cluster, which is really a new diversification for this economy."

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