

Key Honda Executive To Leave Alabama Post

Published on Industrial Maintenance & Plant Operation (<http://www.impomag.com>)

Key Honda Executive To Leave Alabama Post

Patrick McCreless, AP

LINCOLN, Ala. (AP) — When Honda's then-CEO flew over the site that would one day become the automaker's plant in Lincoln, he saw a large oak tree and was immediately taken with it. He told Chuck Ernst that whatever he did in designing and developing the plant, the oak tree must remain.

More than a decade of development later, the tree is still there.

"For myself it became a kind of condition for employment . whatever you do when you expand, you have to keep the boss' tree," Ernst said with a laugh. "I kind of thought he was joking, but the first time he came down to see the development, he wanted to see it."

As he did for the tree, Ernst nursed and protected Honda Manufacturing of Alabama, playing an integral part in its development and growth since the facility was announced in 1999. And as a caretaker would do, he is leaving the facility in good shape and prepared for the future.

"One of the things as a leader is you want to leave a good foundation so things can be competitive going forward," Ernst said.

Ernst, senior vice president at Honda's \$1.7 billion plant in Lincoln, will leave his job at the end of March. He will take over as chief engineer of the Powertrain Function at the North American Engineering Center at Honda of America Mfg., Inc. As chief engineer, Ernst will gain new responsibilities, including expanding Honda's new engine technologies for its North American operations.

Ernst has been a member of senior leadership at Honda Manufacturing since its inception in 1999 as "the Alabama project."

In the past year, Ernst has been focusing much of his attention designing and overseeing expansions at the plant. Last year, Honda announced a \$275 million expansion project for the Lincoln plant that would increase manufacturing flexibility and production. The expansion, which should be completed in 2013, will also create about 140 jobs.

The expansion is tied to the addition of the Acura MDX luxury sport utility vehicle to the plant's existing production lineup of the Odyssey, the Pilot SUV and the Ridgeline pickup truck.

Construction crews were busy Thursday erecting steel frames for a new vehicle quality area, primarily for the Acura MDX. Other workers were preparing the foundation for the expansion of the plant's plastic injection molding area.

Key Honda Executive To Leave Alabama Post

Published on Industrial Maintenance & Plant Operation (<http://www.impomag.com>)

"The demands of the customers and regulations are changing so we're trying to get ready," Ernst said. "I'm leaving, but Honda's dreams are in place to grow capacity, product mix and the ability to adapt and be ready for the next decade."

Lincoln Mayor Carroll Watson said Ernst did much for Honda and Lincoln in the past decade.

"He was very instrumental in making the plant and he has been instrumental in its growth," Watson said. "And you couldn't ask for a better person in dealing with that site. He was very professional."

Calvin Miller, executive director of the Talladega County Economic Development Authority, witnessed Honda's growth under Ernst's leadership firsthand.

"The plant has grown from an initial 1,500 employees to 4,000 since he's been there," Miller said. "He helped design the plant and he got it going at a faster rate than what was expected."

Ed Castille, director of Alabama Industrial Development Training, the state's worker training program, also said Ernst was a key component to Honda's development.

"What he did when we worked together was to develop the training and recruitment process," Castille said. "We worked side by side to find the most qualified workers we could. He's helped this Honda plant be a success with great leadership."

A native of Ohio and father of three, Ernst got his start with Honda in 1985 and was involved with the start-up of Honda's Anna Engine plant in his home state. Ernst comes from a strong line of engineers. His grandfather worked as an aerospace engineer and inventor and his father was an architectural engineer.

"And I've always had a natural tendency for things that moved under power," Ernst said. "I loved motor bikes and scooters growing up . and Honda has been an extension of my personal interest."

Ernst said it was his then-13-year-old daughter who finally convinced him to move from Ohio to take his current position in Alabama — even though at the time the Lincoln project was still very secretive and he didn't know really what he'd be working on.

"My daughter said, 'you always wanted to build new facilities so you should take it because it's what you've always wanted to do,'" Ernst said.

Ernst said it was the best decision he ever made in his career to take his daughter's advice and come to Alabama.

"It's been my honor and distinct pleasure to be part of this project," he said. "And I can't say enough about the people of Alabama and the people who make our products. I'm pretty proud of what we've been able to accomplish here."

Key Honda Executive To Leave Alabama Post

Published on Industrial Maintenance & Plant Operation (<http://www.impomag.com>)

Don Hopper, executive director of the Calhoun County Economic Development Council, said Ernst has meant a lot to the state.

"He's been a good advocate for Alabama and been a good ambassador for the area," Hopper said.

Source URL (retrieved on 03/31/2015 - 12:06am):

http://www.impomag.com/news/2012/02/key-honda-executive-leave-alabama-post?qt-digital_editions=0