First Dodge Darts From IL Plant Reach Showrooms

The Associated Press

BELVIDERE, Ill. (AP) — The first Dodge Darts to come out of a revitalized Chrysler plant in northern Illinois were shipped off to dealers this week, setting the stage for what chief executive Sergio Marchionne called the automaker's "real battle" in the compact market.

The 2013 Dart five-seat sedan, made at the Belvidere assembly plant, has received good reviews from automotive analysts so far and will now be judged by consumers.

"Our future hangs on how well we do here," Marchionne told reporters Thursday after meeting with the plant's workers. "I've been public on this before. I can probably get one car wrong. Of all the cars I can get wrong, it ain't this one. This one is too visible, it's too large, it's got too much embedded into it to go wrong."

The Chrysler Group LLC CEO was visiting the plant for the second time this year to congratulate workers, the Rockford Register Star reported (http://bit.ly/MAtxIY [1]).

Marchionne leads Italy's Fiat SpA and took over Chrysler in 2009 after the company filed for bankruptcy protection.

Around that time, the plant in Belvidere had far fewer workers than it does today and briefly shut down, leading to fears it could close for good. Now, Chrysler is on target to boost the plant's workforce to 4,500 this year, strengthening the outlook for a once-dominant manufacturing area that now has the state's highest unemployment rate.

The fuel-efficient Dart is Chrysler's first compact sedan since 2005. The compact sedan segment is the second largest in the U.S. automotive market.

"Obviously, the Dart is a big step forward for us because we've been absent of a competitive product in the compact market in the U.S. forever," Marchionne said. "All the efforts we've made so far have been made by effectively fighting and repositioning the SUV and the pickup truck market. We have had some success in the large sedans with the Chrysler 200 and 300. The real battle for us in this marketplace starts today."

Marchionne decided to build the Dart at the Illinois plant and added jobs there as part of a 2010 package of $62 million in state tax breaks and other incentives given to the automaker.

He announced Thursday that the Jeep Compass and Jeep Patriot, which also are assembled in Belvidere, will go out of production in August 2014.

More products will be launched on the Dart architecture, Marchionne said. He aims to get the Belvidere plant producing as many as 400,000 cars a year.

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