

Sumter Cement to construct new facility

By Bob Reichman

Amid battles in court and strong objections from nearby residents, Sumter Cement Company announced last week that it plans to immediately begin construction of a new 1.7-million ton cement manufacturing facility in Center Hill.

The facility will be located on about 50 acres adjoining about 1,300 acres south of the city between County Road 478 and County Road 469 on which the company plans to mine.

The site is located on land that will provide the main ingredient for the manufacturing process.

During the construction phase of the project, about 500 craftsmen will be employed to bring the plant to project completion, according to a press release from Daniel Fritz, company president. About 120 permanent employees will operate the plant, scheduled to be operation by 2009.

"We see the construction and operation of the plant as a great fit for the City of Center Hill, Sumter County and its residents," Fritz said. "The jobs created here will help stimulate the local economy and will substantially increase new tax revenues to the city and county.

"We look forward to a strong working relationship with the folks here in central Florida," he said. "Our sister company, Suwannee American Cement, near the north Florida town of Branford, Suwannee County, is a prime example of how our operations fit well in an area by stimulating the economy and offering much in the way of support through the company's direct and employee involvement in community activities and projects."

Fritz said, like Suwannee American Cement, he anticipates the Center Hill project to be equally environmentally and community responsive.

The company has been involved in court battles with Center Hill residents for more than a year.

Residents filed lawsuits against the city for its actions in favor of Sumter Cement in 2006.

The residents challenged the city's annexation of the land for the proposed mine and cement plant and won in circuit court.

In March, Sumter Cement lost an appeal that challenged the circuit court's decision to nullify the city's earlier decisions in the company's favor. Because of that, the city will be required to pay the residents' legal fees, attorneys said.

Meanwhile, the city of Center Hill made similar decisions in favor of the project, approving it again.

More lawsuits objecting to the city's second round of approvals are under review.

Sumter Cement is a joint venture between the Anderson Family of Old Town and Votorantim Cimentos North America.