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## **913 new jobs slated for Hickory: Atlanta-based company plans to begin operation of customer support center in April**

(Hickory Daily Record Via Acquire Media NewsEdge) Dec. 31--HICKORY -- A customer support center for business telecommunications services has chosen Hickory for a project that will create 913 technical support, billing and customer service jobs.

Atlanta-based Covation LLC announced Tuesday that its Hickory operation will open in April. The company plans to hire 544 people by the end of 2009, and to employ 913 within three years.

The average salary for the employees will be \$34,500, which is more than Catawba County's annual average wage of \$33,300.

The Covation customer service support center will occupy a 60,000-square-foot building adjacent to the new Graystone Eye campus in McDonald Crossing Professional Park off Tate Boulevard and the McDonald Parkway.

The \$3 million building was built by Atlanta real estate company Adevco and designed as a speculative call center. Covation will invest about \$6.2 million in the building during the next five years.

Hickory Mayor Rudy Wright called Covation's announcement an exciting way to close 2008 in Hickory and Catawba County.

"We are thankful that Covation chose Hickory, as we have smart and hard-working people in the Hickory Metro that are qualified for the technical support, billing and customer service jobs," Wright said.

Covation will receive a \$600,000 grant from the One North Carolina Fund, which provides financial assistance through local governments to attract job-creating business projects.

Companies receive no money up front and must meet job creation and investment performance standards to qualify for grant funds. All such grants require local matches.

Hickory City Council will hold a public hearing in January to discuss an economic development agreement that includes \$151,331 in incentives over the next seven years.

Catawba County is expected to contribute a similar amount.

"We are delighted with the support of both state and local officials to bring this large employment opportunity to Hickory," said Joseph J. Sanders, Covation vice president for community affairs.

"We look forward to being an active member of the business community for many years to come."

Julie Pruett, director of recruitment for the Catawba County Economic Development Corp., said the organization has worked to further diversify the county's economy with quality back-office support jobs that can help smooth some of the region's economic turbulence.

Since 2001, the Greater Hickory Metro has lost about 25,000 jobs.

"With Covation's announcement, we'll begin seeing rapid job creation beginning in spring 2009," Pruett said.

This is the fifth major economic development announcement made in Hickory in 2008.

Other companies planning projects that will create jobs are Williams-Sonoma, FedEx, Convergys and Merchants Distributors Inc.

Together, the five companies are expected to bring more than 2,300 new jobs to Hickory during the next five years.

"It's great timing," Scott Millar, president of the Catawba County Economic Development Corp., said of Covation's announcement. "We've got to look for good quality jobs at every opportunity now."

Wright agreed.

"It all begins with good quality jobs, and this announcement of 913 quality jobs for Hickory and Hickory Metro citizens should go a long, long way toward our recovery," Wright said.

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