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ROAD AMERICA**Road America rolling****Call center in south Columbus may eventually employ 450****BY ANDREA V. HERNANDEZ**
Staff Writer

Road America's new 24-hour call center on Victory Drive is up and running, with city officials touting its arrival as another boost to south Columbus economic revitalization efforts.

The \$6 million, 25,000-square-foot roadside and assistance services call center, which has been open since Sept. 22, seats 285 agents who field calls from customers with roadside problems. Road America, which has recruited about 220 employees since May, expects the facility to potentially employ 450 full- and part-time workers as business increases.

"This is another blessing for us, the people of Columbus South," councilor Mimi Woodson said at the building's grand opening Wednesday. "This is a community that's... on a mission to change stereotypes, to teach, and to show people in the community we have enthusiasm, we have love, we have vision, we have hard workers, we have commitment."

It has been close to a year since Miami-based Road America -- a subsidiary of MAPFRE, an international insurance company based in Madrid, Spain -- announced it would be building its second call center in Columbus. After a yearlong search for a second home, spurred in part by last year's hurricane damage in south Florida, Columbus was chosen out of 3,000 cities, including Los Angeles, Atlanta and New York City. The company began construction in January.

"We certainly made the best choice," said Dennis Fantis, president of Road America. "We really seriously looked at a lot of choices but one really stood out, and that was Columbus."

Claudio Caggiano, director of operations for Road America, said the available work force and the city's support were some factors that helped sway Road America towards Columbus.

Road America's presence is a sign of a changing south Columbus, city officials said. The opening comes several weeks after trailer manufacturing company Pitts Enterprises' announced its new south Columbus factory. The National Infantry Foundation, which is building the new Infantry Museum, also announced in recent months its search for a company to develop a complex of hotels, conference center, restaurant and shopping space near the museum. At last week's Road America ceremony, Rafael Senen, president of MAPFRE Asistencia, told the crowd that Road America "wants to contribute and collaborate" with the community in the area's development. "We don't want to come here as... simply a new neighbor of the city," Senen said. "Consider us a new neighbor and I hope a new friend."

What is it?

Road America sells its services to corporate clients -- including those in the automotive, OEM, insurance, motorcycle, telematics, telecom and financial services industries -- instead of directly to the public. Its more than 100 clients, which include AIG, Harley-Davidson, Kawasaki and Volkswagen of America, then offer Road America's services to its customers in extended warranties or special memberships. For example, a Volkswagen customer who accepts Road America services would contact Road America directly if roadside assistance is needed.

The response center -- second to the company's 200-plus seat capacity call center in Miami -- serves customers in the U.S., Canada, Puerto Rico and Mexico. With 285 seats, it has the capacity to handle more than 685,000 calls each month. The building features emergency backup systems, a white noise reduction system to prevent agent cross-talk, and an Internet cafe -- complete with a view of the Chattahoochee River -- for employees.

Prior to its move-in last month, Road America was operating in a temporary call center since May at Cross Country Plaza on Macon Road.

Jobs

Road America is "not actively hiring" until next month since the company just hired a wave of new employees in recent weeks, Fantis said.

At the moment, less than one third of Road America jobs have been filled, but Fantis said he expects the rest of its work force to be hired in the next two years.

Eighty-five percent of the call center's work force are Assistance Coordinators, or those who answer and dispatch customer calls, Caggiano said. These agents are paid \$9.50 an hour with the potential for productivity incentives.

Job applicants go through a series of testing, including a typing speed test, a background check and personality test.

Once hired, new employees go through a three-and-a-half week training, including QuickStart training, where they learn customer service skills, as well as classroom and floor training, where they learn about the company and how to handle calls.

Business: Road America is a 24-hour roadside and assistance services company that serves corporate clients such as those in the automotive, OEM, insurance and motorcycle industries. It serves more than 100 corporate clients, including AIG, Harley-Davidson and Volkswagen of America. Customers of these companies contact Road America directly when they have roadside problems. Calls are routed to one of Road America's two call centers in the U.S.: one in Miami, where its corporate headquarters is located, or one in Columbus.

Road America is a subsidiary of MAPFRE, a Madrid, Spain-based international insurance company that provides insurance and assistance services in 39 countries.

President: Dennis Fantis

Employees: 220 in Columbus

Headquarters: 7300 Corporate Center Drive, 6th Floor, Miami, FL 33126, 305-392-4300

Columbus location: 1838 Victory Drive, Columbus, GA 31901, 706-562-7071

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