

Outdoor furniture maker Summer Classics looks to move growing operations to Pelham

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By [Dawn Kent -- The Birmingham News](#)



Bew White, owner of Summer Classics in Pelham in the showroom of his expanding outdoor furniture business. (The Birmingham News/Joe Songer)

MONTEVALLO, Alabama -- Outdoor furniture maker Summer Classics continues to grow its business, with 360 dealers nationwide, a new deal for online sales, a line of indoor furnishings and a growing contract division supplying hotels, restaurants and assisted-living facilities.

The Shelby County-based firm also designs and manufactures furniture for retailers such as Restoration Hardware and Neiman Marcus and it's eyeing additional branding opportunities in Europe and Asia.

Here at home, Summer Classics is looking to grow, too. The company wants to consolidate its Montevallo operations -- a warehouse, cushion-making plant and distribution center -- at the site of the old, vacant Moore-Handley building in Pelham.

Being together on one site, and near the company's 46,000-square-foot showroom and outlet off Shelby County 52 in Pelham, would improve communication and cut down on travel between the facilities, said Bew White, president and chief executive of Summer Classics.

The company employs a little more than 200 people in the U.S., including about 160 locally.

"If we were all together, it would be a lot better company," he said.

Meanwhile, White says he will be forced to move Summer Classics' Pelham showroom in 2018, when the state re-routes Shelby County 52 through the property. Having the Moore-Handley site already would give him a place for the new showroom.

The Moore-Handley building covers 430,000 square feet on 22 acres between U.S. 31 and Lee Street. There also is an additional eight acres with a 12,000-square-foot building.

Vacant for 2½ years, the Moore-Handley property is on the market for \$4.5 million. EGS Commercial Real Estate has been marketing the site since the end of 2009 for owner HHH Acquisition.

Plans call for the city of Pelham to purchase the property, and then sell at least a portion of it to Summer Classics. White is asking the city to help finance his purchase; he plans to fix up the site over time, bringing in his Montevallo facilities and adding a showroom.

In June, the Pelham City Council voted unanimously to authorize Mayor Don Murphy to negotiate the purchase of the property and then negotiate with White on a sale. Shelby County also is expected to participate with incentives.

But White is still waiting to hear from the mayor on a potential deal. Efforts to reach Murphy were unsuccessful.

White started the company that was the forerunner to Summer Classics in 1978, when he was working as a sales representative.

"I didn't like what the outdoor furniture manufacturers made," he said.

He began designing his own pieces, such as porch rockers and adirondack chairs, that he spec'd for a manufacturer and then painted and shipped himself.

What started out as a garden-themed concept has now grown to lines of high-end pieces, including couches, chairs, dining tables, accent tables and outdoor kitchens.

With prices that include \$2,000 for couches and \$700 for chairs, the company has an upper-income clientele. The target market is customers with a household income of \$100,000 and above.

Differentiation, White said, is what has set the company apart. He cites sophisticated designs, as well as materials fashioned for durability and comfort.

Some of the materials developed by Summer Classics include N-Dura, a proprietary, high-UV resin that doesn't fade easily, and Dream cushions, which contain memory foam and pillow tops.

White has high expectations for the market in the coming years.

"I expect the next 10 years to be incredible," he said. "The Baby Boomers are retiring and building big outdoor rooms on the back of their houses."

Other divisions

Other divisions of Summer Classics include Gabby, a line of indoor furniture, primarily accent pieces, named after White's mother, Gabriella Comer White, and started by his son, William Bew White IV.

The younger White designs the line, and in just its second year in business, it will do an estimated \$6 million to \$7 million in revenue.

Meanwhile, Summer Classics recently did a deal with online outdoor furniture retailer Frontgate. The Summer Classics/Frontgate website, which launches in October, gives Summer Classics more control over its online sales.

At the same time, Summer Classics' core businesses continue to grow. The company, which now has three factories in China that produce its furniture, is adding another one in Indonesia.

But 20 percent of the company's product is manufactured in Montevallo, at the cushion plant where about 3,500 cushions are produced per week.

And people from around the world visit the company's showroom in Pelham, White said. Other showrooms are in Atlanta, Chicago, Las Vegas and High Point, N.C.

As for the Moore-Handley building, the local industrial real estate market is soft, and there are not many 400,000-square-foot users, said Mark Byers and Deborah McGill of EGS Commercial Real Estate.

Moore-Handley, which filed for bankruptcy in 2009, had more than 200 employees at that time and had employed as many as 400 there in recent years.

"It's an opportunity for multiple organizations to collaborate and win a great economic development project," McGill said.

Byers said there's potential for a partnership among the city, county and Summer Classics.

"It makes a lot of sense for this project to occur," he said. "It's a consolidation for Summer Classics, and for the city of Pelham, it's an opportunity to remove a long vacant and blighted building from their community and have it occupied by a local, entrepreneurial but yet global company."

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