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Sierra Nevada chooses WNC; reveals plans to expand

Nation's second-largest microbrewery to build East Coast operation in Mills River

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MILLS RIVER — Bottoms up, Western North Carolina.

The mystery surrounding Sierra Nevada Brewing Co.'s much-publicized plans for an East Coast expansion was finally solved Wednesday when the California craft-beer giant revealed it had chosen Henderson County.

The announcement came during a news conference that featured Gov. Beverly Perdue and a host of other North Carolina and local officials — indicative of the massive, statewide effort to lure one of the most respected companies in the beer business to the N.C. mountains.

“We’re getting one of the very, very pilgrims in the industry,” said Perdue, standing on the porch of an old farmhouse at Ferncliff Industrial Park in Mills River where the new brewery will be built. “Sierra Nevada was one of the very first craft brewers in the country, and this is the company and these are the people that set the trend to help proliferate what we’re doing here (with craft brewing) in (WNC).”

Minutes before the news conference began, Brian Grossman — the son of Sierra Nevada founder and owner Ken Grossman who will co-manage the Mills River plant — emerged on the front lawn of the farmhouse after returning from his honeymoon in Costa Rica hours earlier, and was embraced by Perdue.

“Welcome home,” the governor told him. “This is your new home.”

The company plans to create 95 full-time jobs and 80 part-time positions, and invest \$107.5 million in the county during the next five years. The jobs will be created in phases and continue through 2013. The average annual wage for jobs created will exceed \$41,000, plus benefits — exceeding the county’s average wage by 28 percent.

Sierra Nevada also expects that 60 construction and mechanical jobs will be supported during the two-year building process, which should begin later this year.

Not to mention the untold tourism dollars Sierra Nevada is expected to help bring to the region. State Rep. Chuck McGrady, who — along with state Sen. Tom Apodaca — helped introduce key brewery-friendly legislation that made it possible for Sierra Nevada to locate here, said the brewery will be a “magnet” to draw tourists to the mountains’ already thriving craft-beer scene. He added that the project was a “match made in Heaven.”

That sentiment was echoed by Ken Grossman, who three decades ago was one of the major players who sparked a national beer revolution. He founded Sierra Nevada in



Patrick Sullivan/Times-News

Brian Grossman, co-manager of Sierra Nevada Brewing Co., and Ken Grossman, CEO/president, talk with Gov. Beverly Perdue during the announcement Wednesday that the future East Coast home of the brewery will be in Mills River.



1980 in the college town of Chico, Calif., about 90 miles north of Sacramento, and led the charge to satisfy a new generation's craving for complex and fuller-flavored ales and lagers.

Ken Grossman told the crowd he and his team began toiling with the idea of opening a second facility in the East about 10 years ago as the company continued to grow, but was worried they wouldn't find an area and facility that would be a good fit for employees and the company's business plan and brand image.

Those concerns began to fade, however, as Grossman's family became "enamored," he said, with WNC and all that it offered in terms of its physical beauty, outdoor recreation opportunities and thriving craft-beer culture. Then there was Ferncliff itself.

"We fell in love with this site; it's an incredibly spectacular piece of land," he said, looking out across a large meadow to the Blue Ridge Mountains in the distance. "It's got a great heritage, great water, it's near a river (the French Broad). This part of the country reminds me a lot of where we come from in northern California."

Commissioner Larry Young said talks between Sierra Nevada and the county began as far back as two years ago, while fellow Commissioner Charlie Messer added that the county worked especially hard on the project the past nine or 10 months.

The commissioners said North Carolina was working with significant bargaining disadvantages with its less-than-stellar business climate, while states like Nebraska were offering Sierra Nevada free land on which to build.

All worked out in the end, however, and Brian Grossman, 27, said he and his new bride, Gina, look forward to moving to WNC and hopefully raising a family here.

Sierra Nevada will be the first occupant of the 262-acre industrial park, which has been designated a North Carolina Certified Site. The property was annexed by the town of Mills River in 2009 after landowner Vaughn Fitzpatrick requested that 220 of his family's acres be rezoned for an industrial park.

An official at the event said Fitzgerald plans to disassemble the farmhouse — which sits on the 90 acres of land Sierra Nevada is purchasing — piece by piece and locate it elsewhere before the brewery construction begins.

The fight for Sierra Nevada

Ken Grossman and his team had their choice of locations. Once word got out that Sierra Nevada was looking, he said, every state in the eastern U.S. began courting the company.

In eastern Tennessee and southwest Virginia — reportedly the top two choices for the brewery at one point last year — Facebook pages were established pleading to "Bring Sierra Nevada" to the regions.

"We were very close to making a decision on sites very near here ... but we felt the communities, even though they were great, didn't really fit our brand and our company as well as this area did," Ken Grossman said.

Officials Wednesday applauded the massive effort it took to woo Sierra Nevada. County commissioners praised the tireless work of Andrew Tate, president and CEO of the Henderson County Partnership for Economic Development, who reportedly made several trips to Chico during the lengthy negotiation process.

Commissioners and Mills River officials also were heralded as key drivers behind the project, in addition to legislators Apodaca, McGrady and state Rep. Tim Moffitt of Asheville.

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"I commend state and local officials for their work to foster the economic environment necessary to secure these good-paying new jobs," U.S. Rep. Heath Shuler said in a statement.

Mills River Mayor Roger Snyder said the town was incorporated in 2003 with the goal of luring industry, "and I think Sierra Nevada is icing on the cake."

Once the facility is up and running, however, it will be more than just a manufacturing plant, as a restaurant and gift shop also are planned.

Fletcher resident Steve Morgan, a longtime, award-winning homebrewer who works nearby, was thrilled about Sierra Nevada's arrival.

"I'm very excited. I'm a big fan of Sierra Nevada and have been for years," said Morgan, who, in 1986, brought a bottle of Sierra Nevada's Bigfoot Barleywine Style Ale with him on his honeymoon to Hawaii. "I love their beers, but what I'm really excited about are the opportunities that this brewery is going to provide for the area on so many levels."

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