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No sympathy for Detroit at a Kia plant in Georgia

The residents of this town are learning to enjoy Korean barbecue, and are wary of bailing out American automakers. 'The foreign cars took the lead, and they deserve it,' says one.

By Richard Fausset

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Reporting from West Point, Ga. — This attractive old mill town along the Chattahoochee River, with its brick downtown and streets of cozy, unpretentious homes, could be the backdrop for a patriotic American car commercial -- lacking only the plaintive croak of a Bob Seger or John Mellencamp.

But America's Big Three automakers, which are teetering at a financial abyss, shouldn't expect much sympathy here.

Kia Motors, the South Korean automaker, is building a plant in town, promising 2,500 jobs to help replace a textile industry that has all but vanished. The locals are excited to have nonunion work that will start at about \$14 per hour. They are discovering the joys of *bulgogi* -- a different kind of barbecue -- at the Korean restaurants popping up.

And many are wondering why Detroit still thinks it's so special that it can ask taxpayers for a \$25-billion bailout.

"The foreign cars took the lead, and they deserve it," said Emile Earles, owner of Sweet Georgia Brown, a gift shop on a quiet downtown thoroughfare.

Earles, 60, said she is fed up with Detroit -- fed up with its fat labor contracts, its arrogant CEOs and even her Cadillac, which gets only 15 miles per gallon and cost her dearly when gas spiked to \$4.

Buying American, she added, "is still a big deal. But you can only be patriotic until you can't afford it anymore."

Such sentiments represent more than a marketing problem for the CEOs of General Motors, Ford and Chrysler, who will return to Congress next week to argue that a federal cash infusion will help them avoid bankruptcy.

A number of the bailout opponents are lawmakers representing Southern states that have lured foreign auto plants in recent years with generous tax incentives and right-to-work laws that

guarantee abundant cheap labor.

Like many residents of West Point, these lawmakers are wary of helping the domestic auto companies. Rep. Lynn Westmoreland (R-Ga.), whose district includes West Point, said the bailout would actually harm the companies by shielding them from the vigorous competition presented by auto plants in the South.

"Competition makes people do a better job," he said.

Westmoreland argues that fairness is another issue. Why, he wonders, should his constituents subsidize auto workers who, thanks to generous union contracts, often earn higher wages and better benefits than nonunion workers in the South? And didn't those contracts help get the Big Three into this mess?

"The benefits a lot of these union members are offered is much better than what the average guy gets out there, whether he's working in an auto plant or not," he said.

Ron Gettelfinger, president of the United Auto Workers, has argued that union contracts are not greedy, as some critics allege. This month, he said that lavish state incentives to foreign auto companies are one reason why domestic automakers deserve federal help.

Kia certainly found plenty of incentives in west Georgia. When the company announced plans for its auto plant in early 2006, it came after intense courting from state and local officials, who offered the company tax breaks and other incentives totaling more than \$400 million.

In West Point, disdain for Detroit commingles with gratitude for Kia, which plans to begin production of its light SUV, the Sorento, next November.

The new jobs will counter the devastating collapse of the textile industry in this border region of Alabama and Georgia known as the Chattahoochee Valley.

The industry declined in the last two decades amid the turmoil of buyouts and the lure of cheap labor overseas. In Troup County, which encompasses part of West Point, unemployment stands at 8.9%. On the Alabama side, in Chambers County, unemployment is 14.3% -- the highest in the state.

It's little surprise then that Kia has received more than 43,000 applications for the 2,500 openings. Another 2,500 jobs will be created by five new suppliers that will make parts for the main plant.

As a result, West Point can seem like the rarest of American places these days -- a city daring to hope and planning for growth. Driving around town -- in his new Sorento -- Mayor Drew Ferguson IV talks of plans for riverfront development, a new high school, a new kayak launch on the river. Downtown, a sushi restaurant announces itself with a Grand Opening sign; a new Irish pub is coming soon.

Todd Costley, 45, owner of a house-painting company, has added the name of his business in Korean script on the side of his Ford Ranger pickup. He hasn't had any Korean business yet, but with the number of foreign workers who have arrived in town, he figures it's inevitable.

Costley is of the old school: He likes his car or motorcycle to carry an American brand. He supports bailing out Detroit, but reluctantly, fearing the broader economic calamity that may come if the carmakers fail.

But as part of the deal, he said, domestic auto companies must learn from their mistakes.

"I think our government needs to have somebody analyze these foreign carmakers," he said. "Maybe we can copy ourselves off of them."

Some of the opposition to the bailout stems from the long-standing opinion that Detroit no longer builds durable cars.

On Monday afternoon at the Korean BBQ House -- a year-old restaurant in a former Pizza Hut -- a pair of Georgia natives in work shirts sat among Korean businessmen and homemakers, sampling braised short ribs. Both worked for a company that was helping build the auto plant; they said they couldn't give their names for fear of losing their jobs.

The larger of the two men, a 57-year-old in a camouflage ball cap, growled angrily over what he called Detroit's incompetence.

"I drive an '86 Nissan -- it's got 160,000 miles, and I can drive it to California today," he said. "Now you show me an American car that can do that."

Across the street, more traditional Southern fare was offered at Roger's Pit-Cooked Bar-B-Que. Here, too, there was little enthusiasm for a bailout.

Owner Debbie Williams, 50, blamed the Big Three for failing to change with the times and build smaller cars. She said she was thinking about getting rid of her Ford Explorer. "My next car is going to be a Kia, 'cause I appreciate them coming," she said.

Leon Newton, 74, a retired pastor, said the domestic companies should be left to fend for themselves. Besides, he said, globalization has muddied the old rallying cry of "buy American."

"I have no problem with the foreign car companies because they employ people here in America," he said. "We're making 'em here."

Across town at Langley Motor Co., the local GM dealership, salesman Eddie W. Striblin sat in an empty showroom that seemed trapped in another era. The only car on the floor was a black-and-gold 1977 Trans Am in mint condition. The Marshall Tucker Band played on the radio.

Striblin predicted that, despite all their troubles, the Big Three would survive somehow. Other companies may have a better business model, he argued, but no one delivers the romance of the road like the Americans.

"Let me ask you a question," he said leaning over a clean desk. "You ever heard of anybody braggin' on a '57 Honda?"

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