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Batteries Plus charges into Magic City market with two new stores

BY LAUREN B. COOPER | STAFF

Batteries Plus said it will open two new corporate-owned retail stores in the Birmingham area by next month, as the franchisor plots additional growth for the city.

A new store at The Grove shopping center in Hoover, off Interstate 459, opened this week, said Ken Burket, district manager for the battery franchise.

And another is set to open in mid April in the Greystone Shopping Center on U.S. 280. It opened its first local corporate-owned Batteries Plus in Alabaster in December, joining three local franchisee-owned stores in Homewood, Trussville and Pelham.

"We identified Birmingham as an underserved market," Burket said. "We are looking at communities that are growing and vibrant and can use our type of service. We support the retail business and commercial customers as well."

In addition to batteries, the new local stores will kick off the company-wide rollout of unique light bulbs – for sewing machines to cameras, he said. Each store also will feature tech centers, where custom batteries can be built.

Burket said Batteries Plus is looking for local franchisees to open stores elsewhere in the Birmingham area to complement the existing franchisee- and corporate-owned stores.

He declined to say what the Wisconsin-based company's local investment was, but pointed out it has been adding stores

regularly in the 45 states its 460 stores cover. The three new local stores will employ 18 people.

And there's been a steady inflow of franchise applications, despite the economic downturn of the last two years.

"Our primary focus is selling franchisees," he said. "The corporate store team, we test different strategies and product lines and once they are successful we roll them out."

Franchise business is expected to see stronger growth in 2011, according to the International Franchise Association. In its 2011 outlook, franchise businesses are expected to grow 2.5 percent this year, compared to last year, and create 194,000 jobs. And output by franchises is expected to grow by 4.7 percent to \$739.9 billion.

But access to credit for franchises will remain a hurdle.

"While the forecast reflects a stronger outlook for the franchise industry and the overall economy, franchise businesses will continue to struggle with accessing sufficient credit that would enable business expansion and job growth," said Stephen J. Caldeira, IFA's president and CEO.

The largest employment growth gains in franchising are expected in lodging, which should see a 4.4 percent yearly increase, followed by automotive at 3.9 percent and retail products and services at 3.9 percent. The business services sector is anticipated to decline by a fraction of a percent, 2011's only decline.