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EA Sports expanding Austin presence, bringing 300 jobs

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Video game publisher Electronic Arts will open a branch of its famed EA Sports game division in Austin, part of an expansion that will bring 300 jobs to Central Texas.

The move — which will be announced at a news conference today — comes after discussions between Gov. Rick Perry and EA's top executives over several months. It further cements the Redwood City, Calif.-based company, already one of the world's largest game publishers, as the biggest player in the Austin gaming community.

"We're really excited about it," EA Games President Frank Gibeau said. "Austin is a terrific place for us to do business."

EA employs 450 people locally in support divisions, such as IT and finance, as well as a branch of the EA-owned BioWare Corp. game development studio.

The expansion could bring the development of huge gaming franchises to Austin.

Company officials wouldn't name specific games, but EA Sports is the developer behind such titles as "Madden NFL," "NCAA Football," "FIFA Soccer" and more.

Gibeau said hiring already has begun for the new jobs, which will include software engineers, game designers, artists, programmers and senior technical positions. Half will be permanent positions; the rest will be contract work, he said.

"We really are growing as a company right now, and we want to expand our position in Austin," Gibeau said.

Company officials will hold a news conference today with Perry at BioWare's offices off MoPac Boulevard (Loop 1) in North Austin.

Gibeau credited Perry's efforts and pointed to Texas' business-friendly climate and the company's talent pipelines with state universities, as well as the talent based in Austin.

Perry's "been a great proponent," Gibeau said.

In recent years, Perry has touted incentives as a way to recruit video game companies to Texas. In 2008, he appeared at the Electronic Entertainment Expo video game conference in Los Angeles and met with EA officials and other industry leaders.

"We're talking to these guys and saying, 'What's it take to get you to move to Austin, Texas?'" Perry said at the time. "You tell us what we need to do to be competitive, then our guys will sit down and look at it — and see what we can do."

EA will seek incentives from the Texas Film Commission as part of the expansion, company officials said. The film commission's Texas Moving Image Industry Incentive Program also is open to video games.

Perry spokesman Mark Miner said it is premature to discuss how large those incentives might be, but he said the governor was in close communication with EA officials regarding the expansion.

"Gov. Perry has made expanding the gaming industry in Texas a priority of his," Miner said.

Over the years, many EA jobs have migrated to Texas from California. In 2007, the company employed about 2,800 people in California — it's now down to less than 1,700, Gibeau said.

A "good many" of those jobs went to Texas, Gibeau said. The company has 8,000 employees worldwide as of 2010.

EA Sports has studios in Orlando, Fla., and Burnaby, British Columbia, but officials said the new Austin branch won't result in net job losses in the other locations.

Locally, while Electronic Arts plans to expand its presence in two adjacent buildings near the Domain, it could also seek to expand elsewhere, Gibeau said, without giving a specific timetable.

"We're just getting a toehold in there, build a beachhead and start to expand from there," he said. "So my sense is initially they'll be working on a lot of different projects in EA Sports, and as they grow in scale and mass, we'll start to look at franchise planning in the future."

Courtesy of JB Goodwin