

CHIQUITA WEIGHS MOVE TO ATLANTA

By Walter Woods

Metro Atlanta could be getting a bunch of new jobs.

Chiquita Brands International, purveyor of those bunches of blue-stickered bananas in the produce aisle, may be slipping out of its home office in Cincinnati and moving to Atlanta.

Chiquita's chief executive officer, Fernando Aguirre, told employees in an e-mail Tuesday that the company is considering a new headquarters.

"Staying in downtown Cincinnati is an option," his message said. "In addition, we are considering other locations in the greater Cincinnati area as well as in South Florida or Atlanta."

A decision could come in a month or so, according to Aguirre's e-mail, which was sent to employees following a published report Tuesday in the Cincinnati Enquirer.

Chiquita, a Fortune 1,000 company, has about 300 employees in Chiquita Center, an office tower in downtown Cincinnati. The company's lease is up next August, and Chiquita is looking for the best headquarters in terms of cost, access to transportation, growth potential and quality of life for its employees, said spokesman Michael Mitchell.

Company executives often fly through Atlanta from Cincinnati, a Delta Air Lines hub, en route to Latin America, where most of the company's employees are located, Mitchell said.

"It is useful for us to have access networks to get to Latin America efficiently," Mitchell said.

Of Chiquita's 25,000 employees, about 17,000 are in four countries in Latin America where the company keeps farms — Costa Rica, Panama, Honduras and Guatemala. The company also has major operations in Europe.

Chiquita has been in Cincinnati for about 20 years. It was founded in the late 1800s as the Boston Fruit Co. and listed on the New York Stock Exchange in 1903 as the United Fruit Co. It introduced the name Chiquita, as well as its "Miss Chiquita" character, in 1944.

The company moved to Cincinnati when it was acquired by the city's leading financier, Carl Lindner. But he lost control of the company when it emerged from Chapter 11 bankruptcy in 2002.

Chiquita has been a good corporate citizen in Cincinnati, and officials are negotiating to keep the company in Ohio, said Chris Smith, a representative of the Ohio Department of Development.

"Our hope is they'll stay. They're a wonderful company and a great asset," Smith said.

Officials with Georgia's Department of Economic Development would not confirm Chiquita is looking at metro Atlanta.

UPS, Newell Rubbermaid, Rayovac and other well-known employers have relocated their headquarters to Atlanta in recent years.

The metro area is already home to more than a dozen Fortune 500 companies.