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BRIAN HARRIS
PORSCHE & AUDI



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Selling Louisiana

Kristy S. Bonner
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He has traveled to distant countries where an economic boom has created a "la-la land" for the rich. Although George M. Sfeir has seen mansions, race cars, falcons, camels and an eight-star hotel on his journeys, the purpose of his travels is not entertainment.

He is trying to sell Louisiana - its products and services, that is - in the Middle East.

Sfeir, who is from Lebanon but has lived in Lafayette for the past 26 years, has been meeting face-to-face with potential business partners in the region on behalf of the American International Investment Group, an initiative begun by Sen. Nick Gautreaux, D-Abbeville.

Sfeir, CEO of Technical Industries Inc., has met with at least a dozen different companies, in addition to ambassadors and dignitaries to cultivate a relationship with Middle Eastern businesses for his company and Louisiana.

Gautreaux said the effort is starting in the Middle East because oil and gas production is increasing there, but they are also looking at other areas.



Help for small business is available

The following sources can offer guidance for Louisiana businesses that want to sell their products overseas or with other business growth concerns.

- **Sen. Nick Gautreaux**

Call: (225) 342-2040, 740-6425 or (866) 740-6425

E-mail: gautreauxn@legis.state.la.us

- **La. Department of Economic Development**

www.lded.state.la.us

- **Enterprise Center of Louisiana**

Call 886-9115 or go to www.ecol.org

"Right now we have about five Louisiana companies on board, so far all of them are oil and gas service companies or related," Sfeir said, but they are still trying to get the word out to companies involved in other industries.

He has made two trips to the region so far as part of the effort. The first took place in October 2004 and Sfeir had returned from another trip to the area March 14.

"The overall objective has been to bring work to local oil service companies in this area and introduce our Louisiana products and services to (the Middle East)," Sfeir said. "Our main concern is revitalizing the (oil and gas service) industry, and to let local companies sell their products overseas."

Though Gautreaux has not made the journey himself to the Middle East to push the initiative, his objective is economic gains for the state.

"The whole thing is about bringing jobs to Louisiana," Gautreaux said.

Gautreaux and Sfeir first began working toward to bring Technical Industries back to the Acadiana area, but now Sfeir is helping the senator to spread his message.

The main objective is to get local businessmen to reactivate the oil and gas service industry in Louisiana, Sfeir said. In the early 1980s and late 70s, Louisiana was a main center for oil and gas service industries, but that has changed, Sfeir said.

According to the Society of Petroleum Engineers, more than 80 percent of the proven energy reserves lie in the Middle East.

"In order to revitalize our economy, most of the oil reserves proven in the world are between

- **U.S. Small Business Administration**

www.sbaonline.sba.gov

- **LeCentre International De Lafayette**

www.lecentre.org



Submitted Photo

His Royal Highness Ruler of United Arab Emirates sheik Mohamed Ben Zayed Al-Nahayan shaking hands with George M. Sfeir, CEO of Technical Industries Inc.

the Caspian Sea all the way to Morocco," Sfeir said. "The Middle East, that's where the known energy reserves are."

Sen. Gautreaux's main interest was to form an entity to help local companies do business in that area, Sfeir said. But there are opportunities for other industries as well.

"We're trying to help as many local companies that want to be helped expand their market," Sfeir said.

Computer companies could come into play and exporting rice and sugar has been discussed.

Middle Eastern governments and the Louisiana Economic Development officials have shown some interest in helping with financial aspects of the effort. But there are still obstacles, Gautreaux said. He stressed that the U.S. embassies and Homeland Security Office must be supportive of such efforts. Officials should ensure companies "are not hampered from doing business," he said.

Gautreaux said one problem is that it is still difficult for foreign investors to come to the United States, even years after the Sept. 11, 2001, terror attacks.

"We understand why, but there is also a lot of red tape that could be dealt with in advance. We're trying to develop a business relationship," Gautreaux said. "We want their money over here."

Sfeir agreed that right now, foreign policy is putting a strain on business dealings in the Middle East.

"After invading Iraq we lost a lot of credibility. That's a given. There has been a lot of threats made on freezing foreign investments," Sfeir said.



Sen. Nick Gautreaux

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Despite this, he said Middle Eastern representatives he has met with are not entirely opposed to working with American companies.

"They're 50/50, they're hesitant," Sfeir said. "We need to push it."

At one time the United States had 80 percent of the foreign market. Right now we only have 30 percent of that market, Sfeir said, which he attributed to foreign policies and attitudes.

"At one time all the rigs were American made, all the employees were Americans overseas, all the tools were American, most of the cars were American," he said. "Now you have Chinese rigs working in Qatar, you have Russian rigs being awarded in Saudi Arabia, you have French oil companies being in Saudi Arabia, in the UAE there are very low awards going to American companies."

Sfeir said delivering on our promises could heal some of the concerns expressed in the region about doing business with the United States.

"We have to assure them. Go there and show good faith, deliver on our word, when we say we're going to do something, we need to follow up with it and not go there just to be in front of the news media and then after the news media is gone forget about it," Sfeir said.

The senator agrees that a good working relationship with foreign businesses is crucial.

"We need to treat them well. ... and help them invest their money," Gautreaux said.

So far, Sfeir has been handling meeting the potential overseas clients, but Gautreaux said he is trying to host a dinner or reception at the upcoming Oil Technology Conference in Houston to come face-to-face with these businessmen to assure them Louisiana is serious about doing business.

The effort is starting with oil and gas related companies, there are other business opportunities.

"I'd love to have other businesses interested call," Gautreaux said. "I want small companies that want to grow their business. It's a great opportunity."

But why go to the Middle East while there is still fighting going on?

"What I know about the Middle East is that there is a lot of money there," Gautreaux said. "We service the entire oil and gas industry here in Louisiana. ... What's a better idea for us than to go into a region that has money and has oil and gas."

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What we see on TV is not all there is to the Middle East, he said.

"There is a lot of commonality between Louisiana and these countries. We have all these cultures mixed in one pie," he said. "We are so similar."

Gautreaux is banking on those similarities to create a relationship between the Middle East and Louisiana.

"It's a relationship in business that keeps your customers," Gautreaux said

Sfeir agrees the Middle East is an area of opportunity.

"That's where the oil is," he said. "You want to trade with people who have money - that's where the money is."

Gautreaux said he came to Sfeir because of his experience and knowledge of the region.

"We're already established overseas. He's using us as a tool to revitalize the economy," Sfeir said. "If you want to go there, let me show you. We can help get it financed, we can help you get the land there, we can get you a local partner."

The main intention is to sell Louisiana products overseas, Sfeir said, who is not being paid by the state for his efforts.

"We have our own contracts to fulfill and we're trying to take Louisiana with us," he said. "Even if half of the promises were delivered on, that's a big benefit for the Louisiana economy."

And despite the potential obstacles, Sfeir said it is worth it.

"Each requisition is enough work for a year for (small) shops," he said, adding that it's worth the time to get the knowledge of how to break into a foreign market.

"The crumbs are millions, if we do it right it's in the billions," Sfeir said. "If you get the crumbs, you're still getting a lot."

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