

Ford to open Silicon Valley lab

DEE-ANN DURBIN - AP Auto Writer - Associated Press

Ford Motor Co. is the latest automaker to open a research lab in Silicon Valley, where it hopes to scout out new technology and keep ahead of trends.

The company said Friday that it plans to open the lab near Stanford University in Palo Alto, Calif., in the first few months of this year. It will employ around 15 people, including some recruited locally and others who will rotate in from Ford's headquarters in Dearborn.

Ford's Chief Technical Officer Paul Mascarenas said the company decided about a year ago that it needed a bigger presence in Silicon Valley.

"This is a very natural extension into one of the most innovative communities in the world," he said.

He said the lab will work on ways to better integrate phones and other personal devices into cars, as well as safety systems that alert drivers when they're approaching another car.

The lab will also solicit and test applications from independent programmers. One app Ford is currently studying can find an open parking space and reserve it. Another would improve weather reporting by transmitting signals when a car's rain-sensing wipers are triggered.

Mascarenas said the lab will also study larger issues, including population growth in developing countries like China and India, and how best to handle traffic in those countries.

The lab will work with Ford headquarters as well as its design studio in Southern California and its office at Microsoft Corp. in Washington. Microsoft and Ford jointly developed Ford's Sync voice-activated entertainment system and My Ford Touch touch-screen dashboard.

But Mascarenas said it's important that the lab be in Silicon Valley - not Dearborn - so employees feel free to experiment.

Ford joins several other automakers that have similar offices in Silicon Valley, including General Motors Co., BMW AG and the Renault-Nissan alliance.

K. Venkatesh Prasad, a senior technical leader at Ford who will commute between Dearborn and the new office, said Ford considered opening a Silicon Valley office in the past but the technology wasn't ready. Now, he said, the Sync platform makes it easier and faster to reprogram the car and update it with new applications. Ford introduced Sync four years ago.

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"The car is finally a platform," Prasad said.

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