

Spyker in talks with GM to buy Saab

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Spyker, the Netherlands-based producer of premium sports cars, said it was talking to General Motors about buying its Saab premium brand together with Convers Group, its biggest shareholder.

Saab said on Wednesday that it was still talking to "a number of parties" after GM on Tuesday said that it would wind down the 60-year-old brand next year if it failed to find a suitable buyer by the end of this month. A bid led by Sweden's Koenigsegg Automotive collapsed last week.

Spyker, like Koenigsegg, makes high-end, hand-built premium sports cars in very small numbers. Last month, the company said that it was moving its production from Zeewolde in the Netherlands to Coventry in the UK.

Like Saab, the company historically built aircraft as well as cars.

Industry analysts on Wednesday expressed scepticism about Spyker's bid, given the potentially awkward fit of a top-end niche producer with a high-volume, loss-making carmaker like Saab.

"They make very high-end, very quirky cars, and sell them mainly in the US," said Chas Hallett, editor of Britain's Autocar magazine. "Their ability to move into mass production and global brand management would be very slim – but it would be the same situation if Koenigsegg had bought them."

US investor Ira Rennert's Renco Group also expressed preliminary interest in buying Saab last year, along with a group of US investors from the US state of Wyoming, led by Merbanco, the merchant bank. However, there was no sign on Wednesday of this interest being given a new lease of life.

"Tonight we were disappointed to learn that the Merbanco consortium would not be invited to continue its efforts to acquire Saab," Christopher Johnson, Merbanco's chief executive, said in a statement.

Beijing Automotive Industry Holding Co, the Chinese carmaker, has approached Saab's management about acquiring production equipment to make its 9-5 model in China. However, GM is said to be cautious about doing a deal with a competitor in the fast-growing Chinese market, and a person close to the deal said that sale was "uncertain".

Sweden's government on Wednesday reaffirmed its willingness to offer loan guarantees to help potential owners keep Saab afloat, provided manufacturing remained in the country. The company employs 3,400 people at its sole assembly plant in Trollhättan, south-west Sweden, and thousands more have jobs that depend on the brand.

"If we're to go in with the taxpayer's money, then the production must be kept in Sweden, and also create jobs in Sweden," Maud Olofsson, minister for enterprise and energy, told Swedish radio.

Any new bidder would need a guarantee from the Swedish government to unlock a €400m (\$602m) loan to Saab recently approved by the European Investment Bank.

Labour groups welcomed GM's decision to spare Saab from immediate liquidation. "It has given us renewed hope," said Anette Hellgren, leader of the white-collar union at Trollhättan.

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