

**OUR VIEW**

# Grant will help region focus on tech training

**G**ood news has come to Eastern Connecticut in the form of a \$250,000 federal grant to bolster training for high-wage, skilled jobs. The grant is a chance to inject some vitality into the region's economic blood stream.

The Eastern Connecticut Workforce Investment Board will use the grant to analyze where there are gaps in training for science, technology, engineering and math skills. The board's Engineering and Technical Skills Task Force, made up of regional leaders and educators, will issue recommendations to address the skills gaps.

If Eastern Connecticut is to stop the slide toward a service economy filled with low-wage job opportunities, this is a necessary step. While the region's growing tourism industry has been vital in keeping unemployment rates down and ensuring continued job growth, it does not provide the kind of wages needed to survive in a world of ever-increasing expenses.

A recent study by the U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis ranks New London County sixth in median income in Connecticut and Windham County eighth and last.

John Beauregard, executive director of the Eastern Connecticut Workforce Investment Board, said the report shows the growing divide between Eastern Connecticut's median income and the median income of the rest of the state. Job training is one of the major factors that can reverse that trend.

## Existing companies

More than 80 percent of all job growth comes from existing companies. Eastern Connecticut must have skilled workers if the high-tech companies already here — such as Electric Boat, Pfizer, Dow and others — are to stay and grow. Attracting new business also would be difficult without a skilled work force ready to fill the new jobs.

Having workers trained for these high-skilled jobs is not a new issue in Eastern Connecticut. The last batch of workers who benefited from an intense training effort will be approaching retirement in the next 10 years to 18 years. Replacing them means training must begin soon. Layoffs in recent years have refocused the spotlight on training.

The grant is a testament to the region's readiness to address the problem. As a federal grant, the money was subject to a highly competitive process. Job training is part of the national debate and many regions, including much larger ones, are fighting for the funds.

The Eastern Connecticut Workforce Investment Board has displayed its readiness through the work of its Science, Technology, Engineering and Math Board, which has been examining the issue for more than a year. From its work, the Engineering and Technical Skills Task Force, was created and now is funded to move ahead.

The examination will not only look at the needs of the 41 towns in Eastern Connecticut, but also of Worcester County, Mass., and Lincoln County, R.I.

But, this grant truly is just the beginning. To ensure the economic health of Eastern Connecticut improves, much more work must be done. The grant simply provides the seed money. It is up to the region's leaders to ensure job training continues to be an issue of high importance.