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MANUFACTURING

Electric Boat plans major hiring, expansion to tackle sub ramp up

By Ana Radelat
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The man in charge of developing and acquiring the Navy's weapons systems said it's going to be "a tough ramp up" to get Electric Boat's shipyards and another at Newport News, Va., ready to meet the nation's need for submarines.

Speaking at a recent Senate hearing, Sean Stackley, assistant secretary for acquisition, said the Navy is "set to manage that (growth) across our two boat-building shipyards."

"That's our responsibility," he said.

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But Connecticut politicians say preparing for the day a new class of nuclear-powered ballistic-missile submarines is built in the state — alongside Virginia-class attack boats — is their job too.

"It's a shared responsibility," said Sen. Richard Blumenthal, D-Conn.

The decline in the U.S. manufacturing base and the retirement of skilled tradesmen pose key challenges. The state's political leaders say they want to ensure Connecticut has enough shipbuilding capacity to satisfy the Navy's needs and that the state benefits as much as it can from what could be a very bright spot in an otherwise lackluster economy.

Blumenthal said the state must ensure there's a workforce ready to do the job and he hopes the federal government "is galvanized to support those state efforts."

Electric Boat is also gearing up to meet the demands of its lucrative new Ohio-class-replacement contract. to assess the submarine industrial base during the Ohio-replacement construction period.

Electric Boat will be building the new missile submarines as it continues its work on Virginia-class submarines and builds the Virginia Payload Module — an extension of the next block of Virginia-class boats to increase the number of Tomahawk cruise missiles they can carry.

But the ramp-up's bigger challenge is finding qualified workers who can turn out the boats.

A boom on the horizon

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Democrat whose eastern Connecticut district includes the Groton shipyards, said when he came to Congress in 2007 there were only about 6,000 people working there, and Electric Boat officials were warning that number could drop to 4,000.

That was far from the shipyard's heyday in the 1980s and early 1990s when Electric Boat and its partner, Newport News Shipyard, built, on average, more than four submarines a year.

To Courtney, another boom is on the horizon.

"It's going to be a steady process upward," Courtney said of Electric Boat hiring.

But where to find qualified, skilled workers?

Over the years, the skilled manufacturing base had deteriorated because of the dropoff in production at Electric Boat. The state's technical schools were no longer teaching metal trades, Courtney said.

And Dunn of Electric Boat said a large number of skilled Baby Boomers are retiring. Pipeline, whose website encourages the unemployed and underemployed to sign up for short-term training to work at Electric Boat. "No experience necessary," the web site says.

Quinebaug Valley Community College is one of the schools involved in that training. It is building a new advanced manufacturing technology center, which it hopes to open this summer. In the meantime, it's been offering courses at H.H. Ellis Technical High School. The center, and others like it in two other community colleges, were created through the help of a Connecticut state grant of nearly $18 million.

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Stephen LaPointe, director of the Advanced Manufacturing Technology Center at Quinebaug Valley Community College, said his school created coursework to fit Electric Boat's needs and is turning out "a constant field of qualified candidates."

"We cannot produce enough people," LaPointe said. "The switch has been thrown off in manufacturing for so long, it's time to switch it back on."

The defense contractor plans to hire 1,500 new workers in Connecticut this year — about 600 of whom will replace employees who are retiring or leaving for other reasons.

The company expects to grow a workforce that now numbers 14,100 to about 18,000, when work begins in earnest on the Ohio-class replacement submarine, a behemoth known as the SSBN(X) that is the Navy's top priority. Ballistic missile submarines are a crucial component of the nation's nuclear-deterrence arsenal.

Electric Boat will be the lead contractor for 12 SSBN(X)s. The plan is to build one of the subs every several years starting in 2021. The program is expected to cost a total of about $100 billion.

To prepare for that contract, Electric Boat plans to spend $1.5 billion expanding operations in Groton and at its shipyard in Quonset Point, R.I., said Maura Dunn, the company's vice president of human resources.

"We have a pretty ambitious plan to increase our space on the waterfront," she said.

Engineers and designers are at work, and already one new structure is in place.

"It's a big job," Dunn said of the Navy's increased demand for submarines, "but Electric Boat is up to it."

The Navy has developed a Submarine Unified Build Strategy, or SUBS, The state and the federal government, pressed by Courtney and others in the state's congressional delegation, stepped in to help with grants aimed at tackling these problems.

Now there are programs at community colleges, designed by Electric Boat, that train students to fill the company's labor needs and crash courses to turn the unemployed into the types of skilled workers required by the shipyards and other manufacturers in the state.

The Eastern Connecticut Workforce Investment Board, a non-profit created by the Federal Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act of 2014, tries to assess – and even anticipate – the labor needs of employers in the region.

An initial $250,000 federal grant awarded five years ago allowed the board to create a plan with the state's community colleges to train workers in advanced manufacturing skills.

"Employers told us, 'we can't tell you the exact occupations we need, but we can tell you the kind of skills we need,'" said John Beauregard, president of the board.

The workforce investment board, with the help of the state's community colleges, drew up new curriculums.

Since then, the effort has received at total of $20 million in grants from the federal government. The last one, for $6 million, helped set up the Eastern Connecticut Manufacturing