The Day

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SeCTer breakfast focuses on region's strengths

After years of negativity, a positive outlook

By ERICA MOSER
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New London — As president of the Eastern CT Workforce Investment Board, John Beauregard hated giving presentations from midway through the Great Recession until about 2014. He said he would walk into a room and be "a wet blanket."

But he was happy to be at Port 'N Starboard for the annual breakfast of the Southeastern Connecticut Enterprise Region (seCTer) on Wednesday, bringing news about the positive ways in which the local economy has "decoupled itself from the state."

GDP last year decreased 1.1 percent statewide but increased 2.5 percent in the Norwich-New London metropolitan area, according to the Bureau of Economic Analysis. The region added 1,600 jobs in manufacturing between August 2017 and August 2018. Over a three-year period, employment grew by 4.5 percent, compared to 1.8 percent statewide.

While the region still lags behind other states, the Bureau of Labor Statistics' rankings of the largest 340-some counties in the country show movement in the right direction for New London County. It went from an average quarterly ranking of 327 for employment growth in 2014, to 305 in 2015, to 247 in 2016 and 187 last year.

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Breakfast has theme of 'strengths and opportunities'

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Beauregard was one of two keynote speakers at the breakfast, which had a theme of "strengths and opportunities," along with Maura Dunn, vice president of human resources and administration at Electric Boat.

Dunn discussed the struggles of finding a skilled workforce, between growth fueled by the upcoming Columbia-class submarine construction and the fact that one in three employees are eligible to retire.

"I would say over time, the Navy is gaining confidence that the region can produce the workforce that we need," Dunn said.

That's largely thanks to the Manufacturing Pipeline Initiative from EWIB, which has helped the unemployed and underemployed get manufacturing jobs through a 5- to 10-week training program.

The program has seen enrollment increase consistently over the past 11 quarters since it started, Beauregard said, though more than 80 percent of those hired after completion had no prior experience in manufacturing.

EWIB now is working on scaling the prototype to high schools.

At the breakfast, seCTer Executive Director Nancy Cowser also shared updates from her organization, which started a bimonthly newsletter over the summer, will launch a new website on Monday and is looking at adding new loan products, as state investment shrinks. SeCTer also is working with Electric Boat to develop a large supplier event in May.

After multiple years of net assets declining each year, net assets for seCTer increased in both 2017 and 2018.

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