Job training funds are focus of report, bill

State money seen as essential to sustain trend of employment in health, manufacturing

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Employment in advanced manufacturing and health care promises to fuel southeastern Connecticut's economy for the next few years, according to a new report.

The trend, which coincides with the loss of jobs at the region's tribal casinos, will necessitate, among other things, state funding to sustain such workforce development programs as a manufacturing "pipeline initiative" that has placed some 200 workers in just over 10 months, the report concludes.

Mandated by legislation passed last year, "An Analysis of Eastern Connecticut's Job Losses & Workforce Needs" was submitted this month by the commissioners of the state Department of Economic and Community Development and the state Department of Labor.

State Sen. Cathy Osten, D-Sprague, cited the report last week while testifying in favor of a bill calling for $1.5 million "to expand training opportunities for workers in southeastern Connecticut seeking employment in, or employment transition to, the advanced manufacturing, health care and defense manufacturing fields."

John Beauregard, president of the nonprofit Eastern Connecticut Workforce Investment Board, also testified for the bill, as did Nancy Cowser, executive director of the Southeastern Connecticut Enterprise Region. Others, including Maura Dunn, Electric Boat's vice president of human resources, submitted written testimony in favor of the measure.

Beauregard and Sean Nugent, former interim executive director of the Southeastern Connecticut Enterprise Region, helped prepare the workforce study along with Rob Michalik, the DECD's director of legislative affairs.

"This is one of the most important bills that we've worked on in quite a while in this region," Beauregard said Friday in an interview. "You read how manufacturers all over the country are finding it's getting harder to fill positions. Experienced workers in general are harder to find in the post-baby boomer era. The prototype we've developed, one of six in the country, shows we're staying ahead of the curve."

Beauregard's prototype, the pipeline initiative, has been funded by a $6 million federal grant that runs out next year. It features a partnership

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between the public and private sectors, led by Electric Boat and the Eastern Advanced Manufacturing Alliance, a nonprofit that collaborates with community colleges and technical schools.

In his testimony before the legislature's Commerce Committee, Beauregard stressed the return-on-investment aspect of the initiative. More than 3,000 people applied for admission to the program in the first year, and more than 200 were enrolled, many in customized occupational training programs provided by Three Rivers and Quinebaug Valley community colleges and held either at the colleges or at Ella T. Grasso Technical High School in Groton.

Ninety-two percent of the program's graduates have been placed in manufacturing jobs, the vast majority of them at Electric Boat.

Applying the standard "multiplier" of 1.5 for manufacturing jobs, those 200 job placements will lead to 300 additional jobs in a range of other industries, Beauregard said. The $7 million to $8 million in wages associated with those 200 jobs will generate another $17 million to $19 million in economic activity, he said.

According to the workforce study, eastern Connecticut began to achieve sustained job growth rates in the spring of 2015, well after other parts of the state had recovered from the Great Recession. That growth, the study found, has been fueled by hiring at Electric Boat and, to a lesser extent, the health care industry and the retail and food-service sectors, which have been driven by efforts by Foxwoods Resort Casino and Mohegan Sun to diversify their offerings.

"Electric Boat expects to sustain their hiring surge, as the company forecasts adding 5,000 employees by 2030 given the U.S. Navy's plan for submarine construction." the report says. "Electric Boat's supplier base will also need to add staff to ensure the capacity to support their expected growth."

Such gains will enable the region to finally recover from the loss of an estimated 8,000 casino jobs between 2008 and 2015.

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