Manufacturing an industry's future

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Fall River — The state undersecretary for business development led a discussion with business and educational leaders Friday on the place of manufacturing in the labor market and its future.

The roundtable discussion at Rachel’s Lakeside banquet hall was part of an effort by Gov. Deval Patrick’s administration to reach out to industry leaders to talk about ways of tackling market issues and growing the industry.

"Manufacturing will continue to be a key sector of business in Massachusetts," said Gregory Bialecki, the state undersecretary for business development. "It has a bright future."

Manufacturing is the fourth-largest industry in the state, providing nearly 300,000 jobs statewide, according to the Executive Office of Economic Development says. In greater Fall River and New Bedford, about one in five workers have a manufacturing job.

The industry has undergone “tremendous changes” over the decades, from producing textiles to making medical equipment and other tasks. To survive, the sector must continue evolving, Bialecki said.

"If businesses aren’t changing, it’s very difficult to help them compete,” he said. "We want to help them help themselves."

Manufacturing growth depends on series of goals, said panelist Paul Vigeant, the assistant chancellor for economic development manufacturing at University of Massachusetts Dartmouth. Short-term, communities must lower high-school dropout rates and provide additional training or educations for people already in the workforce. Long-term, they must get more people to go to college.

Jobs in the industry have steadily decreased in this area and statewide over the last three decades, data show. From 1983 to 1990, 370,000 private-sector jobs were created in Massachusetts, but 73,000 manufacturing jobs were lost.

Fall River had 17,000 manufacturing jobs in 1985, but had only 7,000 by 2006. Similar jobs in New Bedford fell even more sharply. In 1985, 43 percent of jobs in Fall River were in manufacturing; today, the number is fewer than 20 percent.

"That’s good news and bad,” said Edward M. Lambert Jr., director of the Urban Initiative at the UMass-Dartmouth Center for Policy Analysis. Despite the decrease, the percentage of jobs in manufacturing has remained at double the state average, he said.

Better education for workers is the best way of ensuring growth in the sector, Vigeant said. "In one generation, we can change the complexion and composition of our workforce from one now characterized by people with less than a high school education to one with college-educated workers,” he said. “What a fundamental difference that would make in our economy.”

A strong innovative sector helps too, he added, because new technologies are likely to be manufactured, at least initially, near where they were invented.

Louis Petrovic, the director of the Advanced Technology and Manufacturing Center and a panelist at Friday's discussion, said discussions among officials and industry leaders are necessary to sustain the manufacturing industry. "If you don’t bring people together, nothing ever happens,” he said.

Petrovic said he foresees jobs in the future manufacturing machinery, sensors and others parts related to generating energy. Businesses are able to survive by changing, he added, and more jobs need to be created within the sector for people now being educated to move into the industry.

Other panelists included John Sbrega, the Bristol Community College president, and Richard Motta, the vice president of operations for Joseph Abboud, a company that makes high-end menswear. About 40 people were expected to show, but nearly 80 attended.

"That indicates the importance of this discussion and the sector in this region,” Vigeant said.

Lambert, who helped coordinate the event, said simply being literate in English is more necessary than it once was. “Education is a significant part of [keeping the sector going],” he said. "That doesn’t mean that everyone needs a doctorate. Employers are not looking for someone with a specific training. They want someone with a basic education that they can train.”

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