

Experts examine ideas to grow Whatcom County's manufacturing workforce

By DAVE GALLAGHER

BELLINGHAM - Local manufacturing continues to bounce back from the recession, and participants at a Tuesday, March 4, summit are trying to make sure it isn't derailed by a lack of qualified workers.

Bellingham Technical College hosted the manufacturing summit, bringing together industry, education and policy leaders to address the workforce skills gap as the baby boom generation retires. About 150 people attended the morning event that included several speakers and a panel discussion.

"We have a lot of manufacturing workers leaving, so the need for a skilled, trained workforce is never more important than today," said Kristofer Johnson, president and CEO of the Association of Washington Business. He noted that the youngest of the baby boom generation are turning 50 this year.

Training for manufacturing skills is particularly important in this region, as Boeing prepares for production of the 777x airplane wings in Everett. The state's incentive package to keep Boeing's project in Washington included \$8 million for 1,000 new enrollment slots in technical and community colleges.

"It's an exciting time for us," said Patricia McKeown, BTC president, adding that this is a golden opportunity for the school to expand its existing programs that lead to a variety of manufacturing jobs, including at Boeing.

Manufacturing is a key sector in Whatcom County, employing 9,200 people at the end of 2013, according to data from the Washington State Employment Security Department. That's the highest December total since 2007.

The manufacturing sector was one that fell hard locally at the start of the recession but recovered more quickly than many sectors, said Anneliese Vance-Sherman, a regional labor economist for the state.

The key discussion in the final presentation at the summit centered on finding ways to get the younger generation interested in high-paying manufacturing jobs. A wide variety of suggestions were offered, including having more student tours of local manufacturing facilities, showing how many high-tech skills are now involved in running a facility.

One concern that came up is that high school, middle school and elementary students are not getting enough exposure to the possibility of pursuing manufacturing careers.

Other suggestions included finding ways for the companies to become more involved in the education process, either by having company officials see the programs in action or joining school advisory boards.