MANUFACTURERS PLAN NEW PARTNERSHIPS AT THREE RIVERS SUMMIT

New London: Dr. Grace Jones, President of Three Rivers Community College (TRCC) and her staff in the Workforce Development – Business & Industry Services Department hosted representatives from two dozen regional manufacturers at a “Manufacturing Summit” on March 6. They were joined by officials from Quinebaug Valley Community College (QVCC), the Eastern Workforce Investment Board, seCTer (Southeastern CT Enterprise Region), NCDC (Norwich Community Development Corp.), the Town of Killingly, City of Norwich and Central CT State University. The topic addressed was the benefit to be derived from creating a regional Manufacturers Council, or from becoming active members of the existing Quinebaug Manufacturing Institute (QMI), which currently operates in the Northeast region of CT and whose President and staff spoke at the Summit.

The QMI is a formal, non-profit collaboration between QVCC, H.H. Ellis Tech and local manufacturing companies formed in 2001 to promote, at the time, the plastics industry in Northeast CT. It has since expanded to include all manufacturing companies in the northeast region; twenty-two diverse manufacturing companies are current members. At the March 6 summit a proposal was made to expand and strengthen the organization by inviting companies in New London County, and TRCC, to unite with QMI expanding its reach and its influence on manufacturing education and employment throughout Eastern CT. Ray Coombs of Westminster Tool Inc. in Plainfield and current QMI President gave a spirited overview of the organization and the many benefits in training, hiring and employee continuing education, particularly in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Math) skills, that he has obtained since QMI’s beginnings. “Our involvement with QMI and QVCC has allowed me the time to focus on strategic planning for my company and has really increased our overall productivity and profits even in the middle of this ongoing recession.”

The QMI currently provides business support and advocacy for the new Manufacturing Center at QVCC, provides scholarships to manufacturing students, provides direction to QVCC’s manufacturing
A public-private partnership for economic development serving southeastern Connecticut

programs, is given first-access to summer interns from the technical college programs, and hosts the very successful High School Manufacturing Expo. The expo teams local High Schools with manufacturers to compete on projects to create, design, manufacture, market and distribute a “new” product as proposed annually by the QMI. All these QMI activities have been instrumental in raising the profile of advanced manufacturing in Eastern CT, in guiding the educational processes that will supply a new generation of workers to regional companies, and in supporting State investments in the QVCC manufacturing center.

Speakers at the event addressed the importance of Advanced Manufacturing to the economy of Eastern CT, the “STEM skills gap” that exists between workers and the high-tech manufacturing jobs available in the region, and the emphasis being placed by the State of CT on providing training and certification in those skills. Mike Mattox of Birk Manufacturing in East Lyme enthusiastically endorsed the proposal of a regional Manufacturers Council under QMI auspices, saying “…[this type of] program focused on training students on the manufacturing techniques needed by southeastern Connecticut will be extremely valuable. Being able to give feedback on course offerings and other program aspects will help Birk save costs on training and turnover.”

Deborah Donovan of seCTer noted in her remarks that forming a Manufacturers Council in Southeastern CT was identified as a “high priority” goal in the 2011 Regional Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS). “The Council will give our many local manufacturing firms a forum to share best practices, to plan for workforce development, and to strengthen their ties, as a group, to agencies dedicated to helping them grow their businesses, like seCTer, Three Rivers Community College and the Workforce Investment Board. Cooperating, or joining with, the successful Quinebaug Manufacturer’s Institute would be a positive step forward in accomplishing this goal.”

Jim Evans, from Web Industries in Dayville, invited the southeastern CT companies present, who are not yet members of QMI (Cable Components, Acme Wire, Birk Mfg., Electric Boat, Atlantic Packaging, Tylaska Marine Hardware, Rand-Whitney Containerboard, Devine Hydraulics, Alpha-Q and Collins and Jewell) to associate with the organization, noting its value as a resource to his and, potentially, to their companies: “We are confident you will find [QMI membership] to be a solid investment in the long term prosperity of your company, Connecticut, and its citizens.”

A follow-up organizational meeting of the proposed Manufacturers group will be held on March 28 at TRCC and is open to all regional manufacturers interested in creating a platform to build the next generation of manufacturing in Eastern CT. For additional information contact Peg Stroup at Three Rivers Community College, 860-885-2310, or Deborah Donovan at seCTer, 860-437-4659.

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