

VALLEY NEWS

THE NEWS SOURCE OF THE UPPER VALLEY

Published 10/23/05

VALLEY NEWS HOME

SUBSCRIBE

ADVERTISE

CONTACT US

WEB EXTRAS

VALLEY CALENDAR

CLASSIFIED ADS

EMPLOYMENT ADS

ABOUT
THE UPPER VALLEY

COMMERCIAL PRINTING

AP WIRE

High Noon for Upper Valley's Manufacturers?

By Sarwar A. Kashmeri

For the Valley News

Last week, more than 200 Upper Valley residents could have signed up for well-paying manufacturing jobs -- jobs with wages and benefits above the national average. These long-unfilled positions represent openings in just four local manufacturing companies whose officials attended a meeting at Lebanon-based Timken Aerospace on Monday to discuss plans for combating the area's growing shortage of candidates to fill manufacturing jobs.

Organized and skillfully chaired by Julie Ladieu-Walton, executive director of the Howard Dean Education Center, the two-hour meeting of 22 Vermont and New Hampshire manufacturers, educators, and economic development and planning officials was another vivid demonstration of the Upper Valley's integrated microeconomy whose needs respect neither state's boundary.

"It is quite amazing. The two times I looked for a job a few years ago, you had to know someone to even get through the door. Today it is the reverse -- companies need to know someone to get a worker," said Chris Arnold, director of the Sugar River Tool and Technology Research Center in Newport, who was at the meeting.

The shortage of qualified manufacturing employees has been getting worse over the last decade. Scott Pope, instructor and head of the Machine Technology Program at Claremont's Sugar River Valley Regional Technology Center, is a leader in the region's effort to train young people for manufacturing jobs. He looked across the table at Warren Garfield, plant superintendent at Lovejoy Machine Inc. of Springfield, Vt., and said, "Do you remember that seven years ago you said this shortage had reached a crisis stage and if it was not rectified, you'd lose half of your work force?"

"I do remember," Garfield responded, "and they are gone."

It was a telling exchange.

As these columns have observed earlier, there are more than 10,000 machinists in and around the Upper Valley, and they account for an estimated payroll of more than \$300 million. These manufacturing jobs support an additional 3,500 or so jobs in the region, and the area's manufacturing sector is responsible for more than \$1 billion in total economic output. If the Pope-Garfield dialogue is repeated a few more times, it will

mean the Upper Valley's manufacturing base is headed for extinction, with severe economic consequences for both Vermont and New Hampshire.

And once gone, a manufacturing base is difficult to re-create. Witness a recent problem faced by a local manufacturing-engineering company that was trying to bond two disparate pieces of metal. The company couldn't get the bonding process to work, but it was able to call a number of local companies for help, and one of them came up with a solution. "This kind of networking is a requirement to maintain a healthy manufacturing industry, and it takes years to create this web of companies." Arnold explained. "You can't just flip a switch and say, 'Let's create a manufacturing industry.' "

A manufacturing career is simply not on the radar screen of most young adults. Misperceptions rooted in obsolete visions of machine shops still persist. "Black soot and chimney cleaning, that is what many parents and grandparents still believe manufacturing is all about," said Steve Epstein, executive director of the Grafton County Economic Development Council, another participant at the meeting. So when it comes time to choose a career, these misperceptions discourage high school students from selecting manufacturing. By the time they realize the error of their ways and want to earn a decent living, it is too late because they don't have the math and science courses to qualify for today's high-value jobs.

Finding a way to change this inaccurate image was a central theme running through the meeting at Timken. One option discussed by the group was the Dream-It, Do-It campaign developed by the National Association of Manufacturers. Peggy Walton, an NAM official, joined in this part of the meeting via a telephone link. The campaign, which has begun with a pilot project in Kansas City, Mo., revolves around a multimedia advertising campaign and proactive efforts to convince young adults to change their perceptions of manufacturing.

The campaign is beginning to change the attitude of Kansas City students, "something we have not been able to do for 20 years," according to Arnold.

While there was a feeling that the NAM project might not be a good fit in a smaller, rural setting, the research done by the NAM and the ideas behind the campaign were of serious interest to the participants at the meeting, and the group asked Ladieu-Walton to continue working with them to find a solution that would fit the Upper Valley.

For decades, everyone knew that the levees in New Orleans would crumble and flood the city in a high-powered hurricane. But nothing was ever done, and the results unfolded exactly as projected. I don't mean to slight the good people of New Orleans or compare the scale of the economic hit were the Upper Valley's manufacturing industry to continue to lose ground in its battle to find qualified employees. But there is a similarity: We all know what the problems are, and we need to take action before it is too late. Perhaps the leadership shown by the group that gathered at Timken on Monday will begin to address this challenge.

Sarwar A. Kashmeri of Reading, Vt., advises corporations on communications and marketing strategy and is a fellow of the Foreign Policy Association. This twice-monthly column explores the Upper Valley's "business climate," focusing on the issues and conditions affecting the region's economic health. Kashmeri can be

reached at skashmeri@aol.com.

[Back to the story index](#)

[Valley News Home](#) [Subscribe](#) [Advertise](#) [Contact Us](#) [Web Extras](#) [Valley Calendar](#)

[Classified Ads](#) [Employment Ads](#) [The Upper Valley](#) [Associated Press](#)