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By Peter Panepento

peter.panepento@timesnews.com

Where are the workers?

Fairview company wants, but can't find, skilled help

Robert Macyko has pushed and prodded, cajoled and complained to get the resources he needs to help his growing manufacturing company stay in Erie.

But for all his efforts, Macyko's company, Windsor Beach Technologies, still cannot find enough of the most precious resource of all -- people.

Windsor Beach has 26 people working at its Fairview plant, which makes plastic components, connectors and medical devices.

Macyko said the company actually needs about 60 people to keep up with demand.

But in a community where the unemployment rate hovers at 5.8 percent, Macyko said he cannot find enough skilled machinists to fill those jobs.

As a result, Windsor Beach is close to setting up a new factory in Akron, Ohio -- a city where Macyko believes he will find enough skilled machinists and technicians to keep up with the growing demand for his company's products.

"I'm having problems finding qualified employees," Macyko said. "I need to (go elsewhere) just to look for people."

Windsor Beach's decision is part of a growing trend locally and is one that concerns economic development leaders such as Erie Regional Chamber and Growth Partnership Chief Executive Jake Rouch.

While Erie has recently suffered through the loss of the International Paper Co. mill and the former Gunit/EMI factory and will soon lose 300 jobs at the Van de Kamp's Frozen Foods plant, Rouch said it has not been able to develop an effective strategy to give many of those displaced workers the skills they need to find jobs at the county's emerging manufacturing businesses.

In turn, those who have lost their jobs remain unemployed or underemployed while businesses like Windsor Beach search desperately for qualified help.

"This is a huge issue," Rouch said. "Windsor Beach is a great anecdotal example of the problem. But it's part of a larger picture."

That picture, for now, doesn't include the right mix of manufacturing training programs, he said.

Institutions such as Meadville's Precision Manufacturing Institute, Fairview's Tri-State Business Institute and Erie's Center for Advanced Manufacturing and Technology are training some workers with specialized skills.

But executives from businesses such as Erie's PSB Industries Inc. and Corry's Viking Plastics have said these programs, while effective, cannot turn out enough graduates to keep up with demand.

"The biggest culprit in this is, if you are a student, a young individual or a displaced worker, where do you go for skilled training?" Rouch said. "The work force development system right now is at a competitive disadvantage."

That disadvantage has become exaggerated in recent months by the expansion of Erie County's largest employer -- GE Transportation.

Macyko said his business has lost 26 to 28 workers to GE Transportation during the past year, as the locomotive maker has beefed up its work force to keep up with its own growing demand.

That expansion has left smaller companies such as Windsor Beach scrambling to fill open positions.

A recent classified ad in the Erie Times-News for machinist openings at Windsor Beach drew only four applications, Macyko said.

The positions typically pay between \$15 per hour and \$20 per hour.

In turn, Macyko said he is close to signing a lease for a facility in Akron -- a manufacturing-rich city he believes has the potential to provide a plentiful pipeline of skilled help.

For now, he said, that isn't available in Erie County -- a community where his company opened a new \$1 million building in the Fairview Business Park less than two years ago.

Macyko said he plans to continue to run the Fairview plant once his new facility opens in Akron.

But he said his long-term plans will likely depend on whether his company can find enough skilled help locally --and whether he has an easier time finding workers in Akron.

"I have a lot invested in Erie, Pa. I have my whole life in Erie," Macyko said.

"Unfortunately, all of the land and machinery in the world is no good if you can't find the people," he added.

PETER PANEPENTO, can be reached at 870-1707 or by e-mail.

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