

SundayBusiness

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2015 OUTLOOK

Manufacturing in Danbury:

HELP WANTED

“Most of the manufacturers are complaining a lot more about the lack of employees than they are about the taxes in Connecticut. It’s the biggest challenge facing the industry in our region today. The most important raw material that everyone needs today is good labor.”

— Frank Johnson, president, Manufacturing Alliance of Connecticut



Carol Kaliff/File photos



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Seeds of growth in region date back to the end of the local hatting industry, area leaders say

By Dirk Perrefort

For years, pundits and self-described experts have talked about the death of manufacturing in Connecticut. But an expansion of precision manufacturing in the Danbury region has many officials singing a different tune these days.

A number of expansions have been announced by area companies in recent months, including a new 200,000-square-foot manufacturing facility on the west side of town that will also serve as Belimo Air Controls' world headquarters at a cost of more than \$70 million.

Memry Corp., a Bethel-based manufacturer, recently announced a near-\$8 million upgrade of its facility, while FuelCell Energy, a Danbury-based manufacturer, announced a \$65 million upgrade in October that will more than double its 60,000-square-foot manufacturing facility in Torrington.

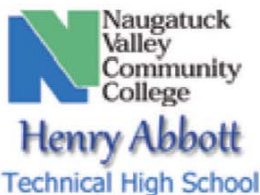
Earlier this month, officials with Kimberly Clark announced a \$28 million expansion of its New Milford plant, which produces the majority of Kleenex brand tissues used in North America today.

"People may have been ready to write off manufacturing, but it's coming back big time," said Stephen Bull, chairman of the Greater Danbury Chamber of Commerce.

"All of the manufacturers in the Danbury area are doing well, and it's not something that happened by accident."

When the hatting industry, the city's lifeblood for the 19th century, began to fall off, Bull explained,

To help meet that need, officials with Naugatuck Valley Community College recently announced an alliance with Henry Abbott Technical High School in Danbury. Through the collaboration, a manufacturing certification program is being offered to area students.



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Joseph DeFeo, director of the college's Advanced Manufacturing Center, said the average employee in manufacturing is about 56 years old, and despite the potentially lucrative and stable employment the industry provides, young people don't appear all that interested.

"It's really about developing programs to address the skills gap," he said. "Manufacturing is very important to the region's economy, but it's also an industry with an aging workforce."

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business leaders at the time looked to attract additional industry to keep the city working.

"The seeds were sown many years ago, and because of that, we have a very diverse economy and the manufacturing cluster continues to thrive," he said.

While the next annual survey for the Manufacturing Alliance of Connecticut won't be released until February, the group's president, Frank Johnson, said many members are optimistic about the future.

"There does seem to be a lot of expansion going on in Connecticut recently," he said. "A lot of our manufacturers are in niche industries. They survived the bad times and now are poised to do well in the future."

Johnson noted that while much of the high-labor production jobs and production-line-type manufacturers have left the country in recent decades, what's left are high-precision manufacturers that make high-value-added and low-volume products.

"What we have left are these highly specialized shops, many of which do military work that is not easy for foreign competitors to take away," Johnson said, "particularly in Fairfield County, where manufacturers are pretty strong and bullish."

According to a survey published this month by the National Association of Manufacturers, more than 90 percent of respondents were either somewhat or very positive about their company's outlook. It marked only the fourth time in more than 14 years that the survey has reached those levels. The survey showed that many manufacturers also expected to increase their workforce in the coming years.

That, however, is one of the biggest challenges facing manufacturers in the Danbury region. While there are a number of high-paying jobs available with area manufacturers, companies often have a hard time filling the positions.

"Most of the manufacturers are complaining a lot more about the lack of employees than they are about the taxes in Connecticut," Johnson said. "It's the biggest challenge facing the industry in our region today. The most important raw material that everyone needs today is good labor."

To help meet that need, officials with Naugatuck Valley Community College recently

Continued below

Photos on front, clockwise from top left:

Programers work on the automatic storage and retrieval system at Belimo Air Controls' new manufacturing facility built recently on Danbury's west side.

Employees with Belimo Air Controls recently moved into its new facility on Turner Road in Danbury.

A robotic arm performs a weld for a bipolar plate that will be used inside a fuel cell at the FuelCell Energy manufacturing facility in Torrington. The Danbury-based company recently announced a \$65 million upgrade of the facility.

Packages of Kleenex tissues comprise a large share of what is produced at the Kimberly-Clark mill in New Milford. The company recently announced a \$28 million expansion that will help secure its future in the region.