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Editorial

Our Workforce Is a Work in Progress

As he talked with BusinessWest about regional economic development and the prospects for 2008, Allan Blair said the region was due — make that overdue — for a “big hit.”

By that, Blair, director of the Economic Development Council of Western Mass., meant the arrival or relocation to the Pioneer Valley of a major employer, creating several hundred new, hopefully well-paying, jobs. And he’s right, the Valley hasn’t seen such a ‘hit’ for a while now.

And while it’s possible we may see one in the year ahead — as Blair explained, there is still movement among corporations even in economic downturns, one of which is expected for 2008 — this is not the shape economic development is likely to take for the near future.

Even though Western Mass. still has comparatively ample amounts of developable land (the Chicopee River Business Park, for instance) and boasts a much lower cost of doing business than Boston and other areas of the state and the country, major manufacturers are simply not coming to the Northeast and the Pioneer Valley. In fact, this region is struggling just to hold onto what’s here.

Meanwhile, ‘big hits,’ what few there are, in biotech, are occurring in Worcester or Cambridge, which have established clusters of companies in that sector.

Which means that, unless something unexpected happens, growth is going to come organically, from new-business development and growth of companies that have already planted roots in the Valley.

For this to happen, economic development leaders have to put renewed emphasis on workforce development and close a wide skills gap that is preventing many area companies —

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from hospitals to machine shops; public school systems to paper makers — from filling existing vacancies.

This is not a breaking news story — employers up and down the Valley have been complaining for years about not being able to find enough qualified workers — but the problem is becoming acute, and it is in many ways stifling growth (meaning economic development) in the area.

Thus, we're pleased to see that a comprehensive action plan will be prepared early next year to address workforce-development issues. This plan will be demand-driven, says Bill Ward, director of the Regional Employment Board of Hampden County, and must be, because the economy won't grow and companies can't reach their full potential if those who comprise the region's workforce don't possess the specific skills that employers need.

Baystate Health can't fill hundreds of current vacancies — and it has a \$239 million expansion project on the drawing board that will probably add hundreds if not thousands of new positions over the next decade. Meanwhile, other health care providers struggle to find nurses, technicians, and other personnel; school systems tax their resources and imaginations to find teachers; machine shops have to turn down millions of dollars worth of work because they don't have enough qualified people; and area pre-schools are staffed largely by people without college degrees.

All this leads people like Russ Denver, president of the Affiliated Chambers of Commerce of Greater Springfield, to wonder out loud, "where are we going to find all these workers?"

The challenge for 2008 and beyond is to find ways to stop asking that question and instead develop a real, long-term strategy for answering it.

Such a strategy, or plan, might not fit the working definition of "big hit," but it would provide a big boost to a region that knows only too well that workforce development is indeed economic development.

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