

## **Western Mass. machine shops attempt to upgrade expertise to win more defense contracts**

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SPRINGFIELD - Precision-manufacturing companies in the Pioneer Valley hope that by working with a national manufacturing consortium they can gain the technical expertise and advice so they can land more defense work.

Their goal is to join a consortium of manufacturers run by the National Center for Defense Manufacturing and Machining, a not-for-profit trade group based in Latrobe, Pa., and bring more of the center's training programs here, said Larry A. Maier, president of Peerless Precision Inc. in Westfield.

In the long term, local machine and tool shops also hope to help the center establish an office and laboratory facility in the Pioneer Valley, Maier said.

John S. VanKirk, president and executive director of the National Center for Defense Manufacturing & Machining, said such a presence would cost more than \$1 million in what he hopes would be federal money, and the project won't take shape until at least 2010.

He said training classes on subjects like the newest way to shape titanium for aircraft parts will start soon at places such as Springfield Technical Community College and Westfield Vocational Technical High School.

The group also provides engineers and makes member companies aware of what the Pentagon and defense contractors such as United Technologies are looking for in subcontractors, VanKirk said.

"Technology changes in six months now, not five years," said Edward T. Leyden, president of Ben Franklin Design and Manufacturing in Agawam and president of the Western Massachusetts Chapter of the National Tooling and Machining Association.

The courses would be for people already working in the industry, Leyden said.

VanKirk toured the region Wednesday and Thursday at the local chapter's invitation. He also participated in a roundtable with local companies Thursday and met with staff at the Regional Employment Board of Hampden County.

Local companies are already busy doing defense work, typically making small parts for larger components, such as thermal-imaging cameras or aircraft engines.

"Busy today doesn't mean busy tomorrow," he said. Maier said. "No matter how busy you are, there is somebody out there trying to beat you out."

Peerless Precision has 22 employees, and experienced machinists make \$50,000 to \$60,000 a year.

Ben Franklin Design and Manufacturing has 20 employees, Leyden said.

Maier said there are 250 small-scale precision machine shops in the 413 area code with a total of 7,000 to 8,000 employees.

VanKirk said his group has received \$15 million in federal Department of Defense Funding in the last five years, and it takes credit for \$478 million in savings to the federal government.

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