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Putnam effort draws students

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By **JIM KINNEY**

Business writer

SPRINGFIELD - There is a \$100,000 state-of-the-art computer-controlled cutting machine on its way to Putnam Vocational Technical High School, and Smith & Wesson has promised to supply \$250,000 worth of equipment to the school over the next five years.

It's a good start, but it is barely a dent toward supplying the equipment Putnam will need to outfit its 16 different vocational programs as it moves into its new \$125 million building starting in the fall of 2012.

Putnam's principal, Kevin McCaskill, says the building will need \$6 million in fixtures, furnishing and equipment.

Putnam restarted its precision machining courses three years ago with nine students. The program has since grown to more than 40 students, largely on word-of-mouth with current students talking up the machine shop to their younger friends.

"That says a lot right there," McCaskill said.

McCaskill brought some Putnam students to Smith & Wesson's sprawling factory on Roosevelt Avenue this fall to kick off efforts to get the business community, especially precision manufacturers, involved not just in equipping Putnam but in working with its students as well.

"We need their expertise," McCaskill said.

Smith & Wesson and companies like it that rely on highly-skilled machine tool operators need Putnam students, said Michael F. Golden, president and chief executive officer of Smith & Wesson.

His company is growing despite the bad economy. Five years ago, it had \$100 million in annual sales. Now it has annual sales greater than \$350 million. Five years ago the plant had about 600 employees. Now, that number is closer to 1,000.

"We're going 24 hours a day here," Golden said.

Smith & Wesson is also vying for several contracts to provide firearms to the U.S. Department of Defense.

"We get those contracts and we'll need employees who can operate these machines right out of the chute," he said. "If they don't exist in Western Massachusetts, we'll go somewhere to find them, but we will not miss out on those contracts."

Also, the average Smith & Wesson employee has more than 30 years on the job, is in his mid-50s and is looking to retire soon.

Adriel J. Alicea, a junior at Putnam, loves designing machine parts using sophisticated computer technology, then using a computer numerically controlled, or CNC, machine to make that part. While touring the plant he paid careful attention to the steps in handgun manufacturing.

"I would like to work here one day," he said.

James M. "Buck" Upson, a former president of Pioneer Tool Supply Co. in West Springfield, said for technical classes to work they need to be filled both with students who are ready to learn and want to be there and with the equipment used in industry.

"This is state of the art equipment," Upson said. "This isn't let's give them some equipment we don't use anymore and let them learn on that."

Upson is a board member of the Roger L. Putnam Technical Fund, a recently-founded organization dedicated to equipping the new high school.

Pioneer Tool Supply is also working with one of its suppliers to donate the \$100,000 grinding machine. He said he expects it to be in place in January.

"Then we hope to start having night classes on it," Upson said.

Upson said his pitch goes beyond the strictly practical. He also talks about the problems Springfield has been having with crime, blight and drugs. "There is more to it than just my business," Upson said. "Springfield needs a win."

Jim Kinney can be reached at jkinney@repub.com

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