

Editorial: Western Massachusetts needs a soul for a new machine

By The Republican Editorials

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Two front-page stories in Friday's edition of The Republican illustrate the challenge facing the region's economy: We're losing jobs faster than we can replace them.

The first story, "Springfield hits record jobless rate," reports that the city's unemployment rate grew to 15.3 percent in January. That means Springfield had 10,250 people out of work in the first month of 2010, the second highest number of any city or town in the state behind Boston, with nearly 29,000 out of work.

Rena Kottcamp, research director for the state Executive Office of Labor and Workforce Development, said a lot of the lost jobs have been from manufacturing. It's a troubling trend because high-paying manufacturing jobs – once the linchpin of the local economy – have been disappearing for decades. And those losses have been accompanied by a drop in the standard of living for many Western Massachusetts families.

The other front-page story, "UMass touts research spending" offers hope for job creation. The University of Massachusetts said it spent a record \$489.1 million in grants-financed research in fiscal 2009 – much of it in science and engineering projects at UMass-Amherst.

At the university's flagship campus research in "green technologies" has spun off into business ventures that are helping the environment.

One such business, Qteros, makes ethanol from biomass. The biofuels company – which sprung from research by UMass microbiologist Susan B. Leschine – holds the promise of creating as many as 150 well-paying jobs. The company is building a \$3.2 million pilot plant near Westover Air Base in Chicopee.

We hope that the research at UMass leads to more success stories like Qteros.

The promise of a few hundred new jobs fueled by new technologies won't create jobs overnight – certainly not enough to replace what the area has lost.

But we hope that research at the university may one day provide a spark to re-ignite a manufacturing resurgence in the Pioneer Valley.

There is reason to hope.

Last year, for example, UMass-Amherst, the Western Massachusetts Chapter of the National Tooling and Machining Association and the Regional Employment Board of Hampden County received a \$600,000 grant from the National Science Foundation to join together to develop and create the latest in high-tech products.

The idea is for UMass to work at the design and research end of the process, while the machinists would build prototypes and hopefully the final products.



Susan B. Leschine, of Leverett, chief scientist at Qteros, and William A. Frey, of Belchertown, president and CEO of the biotechnology company, sit behind four bottles showing Qteros' fermentation process for ethanol

The machining association has chosen four projects to work on, including one in polymer science technology and a new medical implant.

New jobs are created as old jobs fall away. In a sense that is the meaning of progress. The challenge is to offer the skills and training so that today's jobless become tomorrow's new generation of workers.

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