
Windham County positions itself to be business friendly

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DANIELSON — The state is looking to change the way it does business with businesses and northeastern Connecticut plans to be a leader in the effort.

State Sen. Mae Flexer, D-Killingly, held a roundtable discussion on “Economic Development and Innovation for Northeastern Connecticut” Friday at Quinebaug Valley Community College. Flexer said she wants the event to be the first of many discussions in the region regarding the economy, the future of manufacturing and innovation.

“We will have to compete to get some of the resources the state is allocating,” Flexer said. “I want northeastern Connecticut to be ready to go when that competitive process is about to start. I want us to have had this conversation and other conversations so we’re ready.”

The roundtable centered on news of Senate Bill 1, which Flexer said is the highest legislative priority in the state this session, and the formation of The Quiet Corner Innovation Cluster through the University of Connecticut.

The roundtable brought together local educators from QVCC, Eastern Connecticut State University, UConn, the technical high school system, municipal leaders and business leaders to begin the discussion of the best way the region can bring together its existing assets and identify what’s needed to build a stronger economy by supporting manufacturing businesses.

Flexer said Senate Bill 1 will redefine the state’s way of spurring economic development. The legislation would shift the attention toward fostering innovative businesses and support start-ups and small and medium-sized businesses. It would also establish an open competition to establish “innovation districts” and those districts would be eligible for state resources, Flexer said.

Delpha Very, Putnam's economic and community development director and speaker at the discussion, said the region has begun pooling its resources and pointed to the regional technical park Putnam, Brooklyn, Pomfret and Scotland formed in Putnam.

But Hadi Bozorgmanesh, director of UConn's Entrepreneurship and Innovation Consortium and a professor of engineering, said the Quiet Corner Innovation Cluster is an important step for the region. Funded with \$500,000 from the Federal Economic Development Administration, \$500,000 from UConn and \$500,000 from CT Innovations, the cluster is meant to drive economic development in Tolland, Windham and New London counties by aiding small and medium-sized technology and manufacturing enterprises.

As part of the cluster, Bozorgmanesh said, UConn will create a Proof of Concept Center at its new TechnologyPark to aid these businesses in research and development and speed the time in which they can respond to the changing needs of their customers.

"Working with UConn's resources these companies can do in days what has taken them weeks before and that means they can be globally competitive," Bozorgmanesh said.

Jeff Koehl, chairman and CEO of SPIROL International Corp., which was founded in Killingly, said in the last 18 months his company has had to make a difficult decision about its future in Connecticut. The state is a very difficult place to do business, Koehl said. Despite having many negatives against it, including costs and a lack of trained workforce, the company chose to expand here because of its historic connection to the region, he said.

"Connecticut is close to our hearts," Koehl said. "Honestly, the only reason we selected Connecticut is the faith we have that things are going to change. The commitment it made to changing the game in Connecticut is what drove us to stay"

QVCC president Carlee Drummer said the college will help to change the conversation about workforce once its new AdvancedManufacturingTechnologyCenter is complete. The building should be done in July and will be ready to hold its first classes in late August, Drummer said.

Steve LaPointe, director of the center, said it will offer everything from non-credit courses to associate degrees and one semester certificate programs.

QVCC will be able to offer students a chance to improve a skill set, learn a new one or find a new career path in manufacturing, LaPointe said.

Brian Mignault, principal of H.H. Ells Technical School, which shares its facilities with the QVCC Advanced Manufacturing Technology Center until construction is complete, said many people don't realize how much manufacturing has changed.

"It's not your grandfather's or even your father's manufacturing anymore," Mignault said. "It's a clean environment now. Technology has changed everything in the last 10 years."

Paul Parker, director of the UConn Incubation Technology Incubation Program, said the biggest challenges the startups he works with face when leaving the incubation program is finding space they can afford.

Bozorgmanesh said the infrastructure that goes along with the space is also critical. It means appropriate utilities and access to services critical to a small or starting business, such as financial and legal services, at an affordable rate.

Kelli Vallieres, president and CEO of Sound Manufacturing and president of the Eastern Advanced Manufacturing Alliance, said building a strong workforce is critical and that must start in schools at an early age. Many people do not realize what manufacturing is and the kinds of full-time, high-paying jobs they can find, Vallieres said.

The discussion was an important first step in connecting all the individuals and groups who can start to change the economic climate, Vallieres said.

Flexer said all the participants will receive additional resources and contacts from one another and the panel speakers.

"I want this to be the start and not the finish," Flexer said. "We are a region that has tremendous resources and if we work together we can expand on this and have strong economic development in the future."