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Posted on the Internet Friday, Oct. 31 and in print on Sunday, Nov. 2, 2014

THE HARTFORD COURANT

State Must Gear Up For Aerospace Expansion



By **DOUGLAS ROSE | OP-ED**

Connecticut must gear up for aerospace manufacturing expansion and new jobs

The debate over how to best fix an ailing economy often focuses on jobs, and within that focus there has been significant discussion on aerospace. Connecticut's aerospace industry is well known for providing skilled employment and a boost to the state's tax coffers, and lately there has been increasing discussion about its expansion in the next several years as major manufacturers gear up to handle a backlog of orders.

There is good reason for this attention. Connecticut is home to more than 1,000 aerospace companies that produce, either directly or indirectly, parts ranging from minor components to jet engines, helicopters and submarines.

The aerospace industry is directly responsible for employment of approximately 40,000 workers in Connecticut just through federal work contracts, along with an estimated 55,000 additional jobs that are indirectly tied to the sector.

But if Connecticut is to keep its aerospace manufacturing base, and expand upon it as many analysts believe, then we need to prepare for the jobs that analysts say are coming. Connecticut has not been growing younger in the past couple of decades; in fact it is in the top 11 states in the

nation with the oldest populations. Connecticut's median age in 2010 was 40, up from 34.3 in 1990.

To offset the completely different social requirements of an aging population, states need a younger population base because the young pay for the elderly. Younger residents just beginning their careers make up the foundation of a tax base that can support older workers who have retired or soon will and can increase the demand for state services such as subsidized housing, home care and transportation.

We must undertake a review of our existing workforce, how much of it can be expected to be retained over the next decade, and what we must do, both in terms of finding existing skilled workers and also training a new generation.

The anticipated resurgence of aerospace manufacturing means there will be a very real and perhaps even urgent need for the skilled labor that will fill the increased number of job openings. While many analysts say the full impact of increased aerospace business won't be realized until the end of this decade, the demand still will be growing steadily and requires preparation so we'll be ready to handle the work and not lose it to out-of-state manufacturers.

Connecticut has long supported cooperative programs between business and education, and coordination of that nature should continue, or even be expanded as demand dictates. Bills passed by the state General Assembly and signed into law earlier this year also should help with job creation, but we should not just sit back and let events dictate how we respond to the anticipated upswing.

We also should remain aware and alert to both the benefits and challenges we expect to face and deal with each with the same level of preparedness. Connecticut's aerospace and defense firms did more than \$12 billion in business with the federal government in 2011, and that number should be growing. The state's aerospace and defense vendors will benefit from an increase in business but also will be faced with new difficulties as a result.

Put into perspective, difficulties encountered by having too much business certainly pale in comparison to not having enough business, or none at all. Finding ways to hire or retain skilled workers is preferable to cutting hours or discharging employees.

With a concerned and coordinated effort by business, academia and government, the state can begin to see a return to full employment and a growing economy. That is just good business.

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