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Aero Gear seeking workers through Asnuntuck apprenticeship

By:Howard French , Journal Inquirer

Windsor-based Aero Gear Inc., which makes military and civilian aircraft parts, plans to continue expanding its work force through an apprenticeship program at Asnuntuck Community College, company officials said Wednesday.

The company is banking on the program to help it to add at least 20 percent per year to its payroll "for the next few years," according to a statement from Aero Gear president Douglas Rose.

The company employs about 120 workers, which puts the annual hiring goal at around 24 workers per year.

Unlike its hiring spurt a year ago, when the company was seeking experienced machinists, this effort is focused on training Asnuntuck Community College students "through an apprenticeship program that pays students to get training," Rose said.

In 2006, the company won an \$11.1 million, multi-year contract from the federal government for the "re-engineering" and manufacture of replacement parts for military aircraft. The contract, awarded from the U.S. Army's Benet Laboratories, Watervliet Arsenal, N.Y., will help the military keep older fixed wing aircraft and helicopters properly maintained and available when needed.

"As a result of that contract, the company, now with 120 employees, was able to demonstrate its capabilities for commercial applications and subsequently won private contracts potentially worth in excess of \$5 million," Rose said. "We are continuing to win new business and that means we need new employees," he said.

To meet the demand for new employees, Aero Gear is now working closely with Asnuntuck Community College in Enfield on an apprenticeship program that pays students to get the training they need, helping to launch them on successful careers in the aerospace industry," Rose said. The company provides full scholarships for four of the College's students, he added.

"Now is the time for high school students to reach out to our company and to Asnuntuck to begin a real career - not just a job," he said. The company has additional scholarships available for students considering careers in the aerospace industry," Rose said.

Also in Wednesday's announcement, Frank Gulluni, director of the manufacturing technology program at Asnuntuck, said the future of manufacturing rests in the ability of educators to prepare young people for careers in the aerospace industry.

"The scholarship program represents the beginning of a major campaign between the education and manufacturing communities to introduce in the next five years literally

thousands of young people to manufacturing technology and its many and diverse challenges and opportunities," Gulluni said.

Rose also said that students need to see that manufacturing today "is clean, high-tech, and high paying.

"In our industry the noisy, oily, smoke-filled shops are long gone," he said. "Today, aerospace offers terrific career opportunities for high school students interested in following a path that doesn't require a four-year degree."

Ultimately the program can lead to an engineering degree with salaries of more than \$50,000 or \$60,000 per year, he said.

"I want high school graduates to hear loud and clear: Forget an hourly job at a fast food joint. Come to Aero Gear for a real career," Rose said.

Aero Gear was established in 1982 by Douglas Rose and his father, Walter Rose, after the sale of Rose's previous company, Windsor Manufacturing, to Danbury-based Barnes Group, according to a company history. Walter Rose owned and managed Windsor Manufacturing for 30 years before its sale.

With East Hartford-based Pratt & Whitney's "encouragement to provide a source" for specialized gears for the aerospace industry in Connecticut, Aero Gear was formed, according to the company history.

The company started with just one employee working on parts for other job shops, the history adds. "By 1986, Aero Gear employed 30 people and produced complex spur gears and gearshafts," the history says.

By 1994, Aero gear employed 55 people and produced bevel and spiral bevel gearshafts. In 1995, Aero Gear began assembling gearboxes and has since been the sole provider of accessory gearboxes for Pratt-built F-100 and JT-8 engines.

Aero Gear's 120 employees work in a 52,000-square-foot plant off Day Hill Road.

The company has been a subcontractor for Pratt, as well as its corporate siblings, Windsor Locks-based Hamilton Sundstrand and Stratford-based Sikorsky Aircraft since the company's founding. Pratt, Hamilton, and Sikorsky are subsidiaries of Hartford-based United Technologies Corp.