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The downside of billions in new aerospace contracts



PHOTO | U.S. NAVY Pratt & Whitney supplies engines for F-35 jets.

By Paul Murphy

The announcement that Pratt & Whitney won a major new contract for jet engines is good news, but it's also scary.

Anytime a Connecticut company wins a significant contract, it's a positive development for the company and for the growth of the state. But it's also scary because with this new contract, Pratt & Whitney says it is going to need to hire as many as 2,000 workers.

Connecticut already has a dearth of skilled aerospace workers, with literally hundreds slated to retire in the next few years. Most of the Pratt & Whitney subcontractors in Connecticut have job openings -- hundreds when taken together.



PHOTO | CONTRIBUTED

Paul Murphy.

Where are these new workers going to come from?

The Pratt contract, its largest ever, is for engines for a new generation of military aircraft -- the F35 stealth fighter built by Lockheed Martin and flown by U.S. forces and international allies. The Defense Department expects the engines to be delivered by Feb. 2023.

However, Pratt is expected to be producing engines for this aircraft for the next few decades with an expectation of 3,000 F-35 jets built by 2037.

That seems like serious job security.

But there simply are not enough people sufficiently trained to handle the high-tech aerospace manufacturing jobs today, let alone those new jobs opening up in coming years. Today, nearly every corporation of our Aerospace Components Manufacturers (ACM) consortium has job openings.

For many years, we have heard complaints about the decline of manufacturing in Connecticut. It doesn't have to continue. Connecticut's elected leaders need to step up to the plate if we don't want these jobs to go elsewhere.

Here at Aerospace Components Manufacturers we're trying to do our part.

On Nov. 20, ACM will sponsor a job fair and trade show where ACM's members will highlight their capabilities to potential customers. Procurement managers from aerospace firms in Europe and throughout the U.S. and Canada are expected to attend and learn how Connecticut's Aerospace Ally can supply the components and assemblies they need in the months and years ahead.

But the entire morning of that day will be devoted to attracting high school students and recent graduates to aerospace manufacturing.

It will be a great opportunity for parents and their offspring to learn about the high-paying career opportunities in aerospace manufacturing in Connecticut.

Today the aerospace industry is not anywhere like manufacturing of the 1950s, 1960s and even the 1970s. Much of the work is controlled by computer. The equipment is sophisticated and exacting. The employees running this high-tech equipment must be highly skilled.

Connecticut cannot afford to lose opportunities to other states or even other countries. There needs to be a shift in educational priorities in Connecticut. We have started to make modest progress.

Tunxis Community College, for example, last year established the state's eighth manufacturing education program. Even though it only serves 30 to 50 students, it's a step. We need leaps, now, not just small steps.

So, congratulations to Pratt & Whitney. Your success is one example of the current upswing in the entire aerospace industry. We can't let Pratt have to shop outside Connecticut for the numerous subcontractors that it will need. Stepping up for Pratt will attract other engine makers and aircraft manufacturers to Connecticut.

Connecticut's aerospace subcontractors already have proven they can provide the high-tolerance parts and assemblies needed by engine makers. Now we just need to figure out how to attract the skilled workers needed as the industry continues to expand.

It will require school guidance counselors to show students that good careers are available in our industry. It will require the state to boost training programs.

It's a daunting task. It is not a leap to suggest that the future of Connecticut is in some way tied to the success.

Paul Murphy is executive director of Aerospace Components Manufacturers, a consortium of independent Connecticut aerospace manufacturers.