

Manufacturing Remains Central in Pittsfield

By MITCH EVICH

Accounts of recent Pittsfield history tend to highlight how a vibrant arts scene has brought new life to a city devastated by the departure of General Electric, which at one time employed more than 13,000 people. As former Mayor James Ruberto has pointed out, the revitalization of the city's downtown began early in the last decade, when artists began occupying street-level space for little or no rent. Over time, an arts district emerged, which led to new restaurants and shops.

An arts-and-culture economy, however, will take a city only so far, according to Pittsfield Community Development Director Doug Clark. "At the end of the day," he says, "you really need that other element: manufacturing. It really helps fill the gaps. If you have an economy that's just tourism-related, you have these peaks. But what about the valleys?"

In this regard Pittsfield is fortunate, according to Clark. Local manufacturing is thriving, though on a smaller scale than in the past. This point is underscored by a recent report from the Donahue Institute at the University of Massachusetts. The thirty-three-page study, conducted on behalf of the nonprofit Pittsfield Economic Revitalization Corporation, found that manufacturers account for nearly 9 percent of all private-sector jobs in Berkshire County, a figure consistent with manufacturing statewide and more than double the size of other local sectors such as construction, information technology

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Students at Berkshire Community College operate a manufacturing machine that relies on computer numerical control, a form of robotic technology.

and financial services. Not surprisingly, the report also confirms that the county's manufacturing sector is nowhere near as large as it was several decades ago, before most of GE's operations left town.

These days, the largest manufacturer in Pittsfield is General Dynamics, which employs about 1,150 people, primarily in defense-related information systems positions. Roughly 300 people work at Sabic, the international conglomerate that acquired GE's remaining Pittsfield assets. Most other area manufacturers, according to Clark, are modest in size but technically advanced. Many of the companies are in fields such as plastics, precision manufacturing, and the making of molds

that other companies use to produce their products. These niche sectors, Clark says, pay well enough to enable workers to live in the city's revived downtown district and help support the arts and culture economy.

"Our manufacturing has got a lot leaner," says Michael Supranowicz, chief executive of the Berkshire Chamber of Commerce, "and a lot more productive." He notes that many of these manufacturers make use of a process known as CNC, or "computer numerical control." The process involves robot-like machines that are operated remotely via keyboard. Supranowicz cites High-Tech Mold & Tool, a company founded in the early

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1980s that now employs more than 100 people. Many of the other local companies making use of CNC, including Cavallero Plastics, Agi Polymatrix and Injected Solutions, are mold makers as well.

In charting a sustainable economic development model, Clark, Supranowicz and other area officials are taking a broadly regional approach. This is not simply a case of taking into consideration the number of small manufacturers throughout Berkshire County. As Clark points out, there are possibilities for local companies to become part of supply chains serving companies in a radius sweeping from the Springfield area to New York's Capital Region—the site of a cluster of research institutions and technology companies that could enlarge markets for Pittsfield's precision-manufacturing businesses. The State University of New York at Albany includes a College of Nanoscale Science and Engineering, an institution that Clark says could help create commercial opportunities for Berkshire County companies.

"If you look in general, companies need to be on the cutting-edge," Clark says. "Quality and uniqueness and high-technology are factors in deciding to make things here rather than ship [jobs] off shore."

To meet this goal, Clark adds, Pittsfield-area manufacturers will need to be assured of finding workers capable of operating their machines. This is a view shared by Mayor Daniel Bianchi, who in his most recent inaugural address emphasized the importance of vocational education. Berkshire Community College, along with Pittsfield's workforce development program, recently obtained funding from the state's "AMP It Up!" advanced manufacturing program. The money is going to Taconic High School in Pittsfield, where the vocational program includes not only CNC machines but a basic model of a 3D printer, a device small enough to sit on a tabletop along with a computer. The unit can be programmed to manufacture small objects, such as the three-dimensional pieces that make up a spherical puzzle.

Over time, 3D printers are expected to become more sophisticated, posing both opportunities and challenges for manufacturing companies both large and small. ❁

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