

Gratiot County Herald - 3-9-17

Local educators learn manufacturing skills

by Rosemary Horvath
For the Herald

School administrators and board members from throughout the Gratiot-Isabella Regional Education Service District heard a pitch for potential careers in manufacturing along the U.S.-127 corridor last week.

Don Schurr and Jim Wheeler from Greater Gratiot Development Inc. based in Ithaca teamed up with Jim McBryde of the Mt. Pleasant-based Mid Michigan Economic Development to educate the educators on the virtues of their programs.

Schurr reminded the group they have a stake in economic development because a healthy tax base is fundamental to strong school operating budgets.

Change can cause a lot of disruption. He called attention to the days Gratiot County lost thousands of high paying jobs with the exodus or closing of manufacturers. Left were hundreds of thousands of square feet in empty buildings.

Through the guidance of GGDI, state agencies and other organizations those jobs have been replaced. But there is now a 21st century dilemma. Firms can't hire enough employees who possess the correct skill sets required where automation dominates.

School curriculums and career technical programs are keys to success. Educators were asked to partner and promote the area as a team.

Companies in the region employ people from as far away as Big Rapids, West Branch, Lansing and points in between. Schurr said "learn to weld and you'll always have a job."

McBryde talked about the shortage of engineers "of all types. We don't have enough. Every company we talk to that does anything with metal needs welders."

He encouraged educators to tour plants in the region.

"The more you know the better. You get to see how skilled those people are," McBryde said.

Garr Tool Co. in Alma was held up as an example of how manufacturing has changed since your father or grandfather worked assembly lines.

"You can eat off the floor, it's so clean," Schurr said. "I'm not being silly; it's really that clean."

There are careers in accounting, marketing and finance that go along with production. And most companies offer a chance to further an education at a community college or technical school

Dr. Timm Thorsen, RESD board president and Alma College sociology professor, added that educators can make a major impression with students by teaching "the soft skills" of maintaining employment.

Learning how to get along, how to be a team member are things a child learns in kindergarten. Just showing up for work is important, because if you don't, someone else has to pick up the slack.