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Manufacturing: A rich history, a solid future

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Last month, I had the great pleasure of hosting a roundtable discussion with area manufacturers, to talk about the obstacles and opportunities faced in today's market. As important economic drivers, these business men and women produce goods sold around the globe. They invent and re-tool technologies, and create jobs and worker wealth: it is essential their voice be heard in any discussion about growing our economy.

A hundred years ago, Providence and Rhode Island led the nation in manufacturing innovation. Our creativity, products and technology launched America's Industrial Revolution, and this capital city experienced its greatest population surge. Over the years, as production became cheaper abroad, our manufacturing presence declined - but it did not disappear. Today, tens of thousands of Rhode Island small businesses design, invent and manufacture goods and services that move America forward.

Fittingly, our roundtable was held at the Rhode Island Center for Innovation and Entrepreneurship (RI-CIE) the former Davol manufacturing plant, which used to make medical tubing and devices used for decades in hospitals and health-care settings. It has recently been reclaimed and restored into an attractive, state of the art business incubator space.

Attending were leaders from companies that produced aerospace components, medical devices, green technologies, metalizing parts, food production, electric elements and marine trades equipment. Companies such as Teknor Apex, TACO Manufacturing, VIBCO Manufacturing, Providence Metallizing, Swissline Precision, Tower Manufacturing, Umicore, Evans Findings, Palmer Spring and Hope Global, and more, were among the two-dozen manufacturers present. As a result, our conversation was both boisterous and extraordinarily rich with ideas.

As different as the companies were, the sentiments were very similar. Above all else, they said we are facing an emerging manpower problem connected to our misperception of what manufacturing really is, and society's deterrence of students from the trades' and manufacturing sectors. The economic and military strength of our nation depends upon replacing aging talent - including and especially in defense related companies - with new, young, inventive and skilled workers. They said, "America creates, others imitate," and with manufacturing suffering from a bad image of being a 'dying and dirty' industry, we are fast losing valuable talent and our competitive edge. Importantly, they said we have a strong manufacturing infrastructure - with small businesses in the tool and die, plating, machine shop still around - but without skilled workers we will lose that historic edge.

They voiced concern about how we can get educators, guidance counselors, and parents to re-think the value of manufacturing - and the career and job opportunities within it - to our youth. They offered concrete examples of things we could be doing today, and the ideas were simple and sound. They praised our work, here in Providence, with the new Career and Technical Academy, and our efforts to underwrite job training programs with such groups as YouthBuild RI and others.

Part of the change must come from changing the image of manufacturing - it is very much a part of the emerging knowledge economy. The innovations in process, design and product translate into more efficient delivery of products, goods and services. Unfortunately, they said, too many still think of it as "dirt and oil," while it is every bit ingenuity.

Also important was the chance to meet as a group, they said, to voice their concerns and to network and collaborate. This roundtable provided one such opportunity. And while very few of those attending knew each another previously, it took little time for them to find a meeting of the minds on such topics as the role of government in tax incentives, business assistance and regulatory authority.

Long after the meeting ended and they called on me to host follow up meetings, they remained huddled in small groups, trading business cards and sharing leads.

David Cicilline is mayor of Providence.

New England Real Estate Journal - 17 Accord Park Drive #207, Norwell MA 02061 - (781) 878-4540