

Neb. Faces Manufacturing Worker Shortage

BY GRANT SCHULTE
Associated Press

LINCOLN, Neb. — Nebraska needs more skilled workers to fill manufacturing jobs throughout the state, the president of a leading business group said Wednesday.

Barry Kennedy, president of the Nebraska Chamber of Commerce and Industry, said the shortage has become the greatest challenge that its manufacturing members face. Many have come to view the issue as more important than taxes and government regulation, he said.

"Our biggest challenge right now is finding the people to fill a lot of available jobs, good-paying jobs, but obviously those people do have to have certain skill sets," Kennedy said. "Making sure that we create ways to help them get those skill sets is the big challenge right now."

Kennedy said businesses are looking to hire more people but are struggling to find employees who are trained to

work with sophisticated technology that's often required in the profession. His remarks came during an appearance at the Capitol with Gov. Dave Heineman, who proclaimed October as Nebraska Manufacturing Month.

Heineman said the shortage demonstrates the need to boost enrollment in Nebraska's community colleges and universities. He said the state has made some progress through the InternNE program, which provides \$1.5 million a year in job-training money along with private matching funds to encourage Nebraska companies to hire paid interns.

"We need an educated, flexible and dynamic workforce," Heineman said.

Kennedy said his group is reaching out to high schools and community colleges to try to attract more young people to the job. The chamber has also traveled to trade shows at military bases in Oklahoma, Kansas and Colorado.

Nebraska's unemployment rate has remained far below the national average.

The preliminary rate held steady in August at 3.6 percent, while the national rate was 6.1 percent, according to the Nebraska Department of Labor.

Chris Roth, president of Reinke Manufacturing Company in Deshler, said his company needs workers with specific training in computer technology, math and science. The company makes center-pivot irrigation systems and exports them around the world, and relies on robots and highly technical manufacturing equipment.

"Those take some intelligent, highly skilled folks to run that equipment," Roth said. "It's expensive equipment, and it's very precise. Those folks (who operate the equipment) really need to know what they're doing."

The average manufacturing job in Nebraska pays nearly \$55,000 a year and the industry accounts for nearly 10 percent of the state's workforce, according to the governor's office. Heineman said he plans to visit manufacturers in Lincoln, Deshler, Lexington and Norfolk later this month.

Minimum Wage Hike Would Help 34K S.D. Workers

SIOUX FALLS (AP) — A new study says about 34,000 South Dakota workers would be in line for pay raises if voters next month approve an increase in the minimum wage.

The study released this week by the South Dakota Budget and Policy Institute concludes that another 28,000 workers who make slightly more than the \$7.25-an-hour federal minimum wage — in the range of \$8.50 to \$9.75 an hour — might be in line for pay increases as employers adjust wage scales, the *Argus Leader* newspaper reported.

Initiated Measure 18 on the November general election ballot would raise the state minimum wage from the federal level to \$8.50 an hour.

The South Dakota Budget and Policy Institute, a nonpartisan non-profit corporation, relied on data from the Economic Policy Institute, a Washington, D.C., think tank that advocates for raising the federal minimum wage.

"What (the study) can help you do is sort out some of the talking points that may be exaggerated from one perspective or another," said Joy Smolnisky, the institute's executive director.

Opponents of raising the state's minimum wage say the proposal uses a national inflationary gauge that doesn't necessarily reflect economic conditions in the Midwest.

An increase in the minimum wage would force businesses to increase prices, lay off workers or reduce benefits, South Dakota Retailers Association Executive Director Shawn Lyons said.

The minimum wage typically is only a starting wage, and with the state's low unemployment rate, a competition for labor translates to higher wages, according to Lyons.

"The competition for labor has never been greater than it is now," he said.

Reservation Housing A Finalist In World Challenge

PINE RIDGE (AP) — A plan to build environmentally sustainable housing on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation is a finalist for the prestigious Buckminster Fuller Institute Challenge.

Nick Tilsen's Thunder Valley Regenerative Community Plan has beat out nearly all of the 450 initial entries from around the world. It joins six other finalists vying for this year's \$100,000 grand prize.

The *Rapid City Journal* reports that the plan is to build homes on the impoverished reservation that will incorporate Lakota culture, and have systems to filter and reuse water and to get energy from rooftop solar panels.

Institute spokeswoman Sarah Skenazy calls it a "super-compelling vision."

The New York-based Buckminster Fuller Institute seeks out creative design solutions to world challenges. It's named for the late architect and futurist R. Buckminster Fuller.

Railroad Donation



PHOTO: BOB MERCER

Norma Johnson of Presho visited the office of Gov. Dennis Daugaard (right) on Wednesday afternoon to donate \$10,000 toward the project to rehabilitate the state-owned railroad line from Chamberlain to Presho. The federal Department of Transportation recently awarded a TIGER grant of \$12.7 million toward the project. The Legislature appropriated \$7.2 million, the state Railroad Board agreed to loan \$7 million and another \$1 million was raised from local producers and agricultural groups. "This is a very generous thing," Daugaard told Johnson. She replied, "I sure want to see that railroad go." The last loaded train left Presho on the line in 2007. The line is known as the Mitchell-Rapid City railroad. It currently has service from Mitchell to Chamberlain.

Neb. Official Defends Chair Cost

LINCOLN, Neb. (AP) — The State Capitol administrator and other officials are defending the cost of restoring 46 antique statehouse chairs at nearly \$2,000 each, while Nebraska's governor questioned if the work could have been done for less.

The wood-and-leather chairs are the original furniture used when the State Capitol opened in 1932, and state Capitol administrator Bob Ripley said it cost \$87,000 to restore them. He said using funds to refurbish the chairs saves money in the long run because they don't have to be replaced frequently by cheaper substitutes.

The chairs are still historically accurate and museum quality, Ripley said. Purchasing new chairs would have cost twice as much as restoring the old chairs.

"The governor's office suite was designed to be a very special space," he said.

"The items put in there were very exotic. It was designed to be a showplace. If we had brought just something close, it would have degraded the value of the building."

Two Capitol Commission members also defended the refurbished chairs. State Sen. Greg Adams said the furniture will last a long time, and former state Sen. Jim Cudaback said the chairs should be preserved in their original state as much as possible.

A spokeswoman for Gov. Dave Heineman said he wasn't aware of the chair renovation's exact cost until the *Omaha World-Herald* contacted him. Heineman, who heads the Commission, said in a statement that Ripley "should have been more sensitive to the cost."

But Ripley cited another flap that occurred over high-priced furniture, which he said proves investing in quality furniture creates savings

in the long run. State lawmakers were criticized in 1990 by some members of the public when they approved buying 56 office chairs for legislative committee hearing rooms at \$1,400 each.

Ripley said that before 1990, those chairs had been replaced about every three to four years at a cost of around \$400 each. The purchase ultimately saved money because over 24 years, that would have meant a cost of between \$2,400 and \$3,200 per chair.

The chairs bought in 1990 haven't been replaced and have needed only minor touch-ups, he said.

"Those chairs are as good today as they were then," he said.

Ripley said the 46 antique chairs should last at least 20 years.

"It's far smarter to take care of what we have," he said.

Neb. Banking Officials Acted Improperly

LINCOLN, Neb. (AP) — A judge has dismissed a Nebraska businessman's lawsuit against state banking regulators, but acknowledged that they may have singled him out because he criticized President Barack Obama.

U.S. District Judge John Gerrard ruled Tuesday that the Nebraska Department of Banking employees acted improperly when they inquired about statements made by Bob Bennie Jr. But Gerrard dismissed the lawsuit, saying their conduct didn't go far enough to violate his free-speech rights.

Bennie, a Lincoln financial adviser and tea party activist, called Obama a "communist" and an "evil man" in a 2010 interview with the *Lincoln Journal Star*. He also appeared in television commercials riding a horse and promising new investment customers a \$100 payment toward the purchase of a gun.

Bennie says he wants Gov. Dave Heineman to fire the employees.

S.D. Officials: Please Help Prevent Fires

PIERRE (AP) — South Dakota officials are asking people who will participate in this fall's hunting season to be diligent in preventing and detecting fires.

South Dakota Game, Fish and Parks Department officials say grass and woody plants will become more combustible as they freeze and dry.

Officials say some parts of western South Dakota have an elevated fire danger. They add that many other parts of the state that started out with plenty of rain are currently dry.

Hunters are being encouraged to carry a cellphone with a list of emergency contacts, park vehicles in designated areas away from tall vegetation, camp only in designated camping areas and restrict the use of campfires.

Officials are also suggesting hunters to keep water, a bucket, shovel and other firefighting equipment in your vehicle.

Event To Offer Tool To Help Recover Kids

RAPID CITY (AP) — South Dakota parents can get help in putting together a kit of information about their children that could be used to identify them should they ever go missing.

The South Dakota Child Identification Program will collect information for the kits Saturday at the Rushmore Mall Rapid City. The kits may include a child's photos, dental impressions, fingerprints, a DNA cheek swab and video interview.

That packet of information will be given to each child's parents to keep. The kit is meant to aid law enforcement in recovering missing children.

The event will run from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. The packets are free.

S.D. Couple Scammed Out Of \$22,000

SIOUX FALLS (AP) — A couple in South Dakota has been scammed out of \$22,000 by a man claiming to be with federal immigration authorities.

Police spokesman Sam Clemens says the scammer called the couple's home saying that they needed to pay \$11,000 each as a security deposit because of an investigation in their home country of India. The man told the couple he was with U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services. Clemens says the couple panicked because they're applying for U.S. citizenship. Clemens says it's unknown whether the scammer was aware of the couple's ongoing immigration process.

He says the scammer likely cloned the phone number for USCIS because the couple verified it before sending the man the money and it matched that of authorities.

The money was sent using Green Dot reloadable cards.

September Rain Sets Record In R. City

RAPID CITY (AP) — September rainfall in western South Dakota broke a century-old Rapid City record, according to the National Weather Service.

About 5.2 inches of rain was recorded by the National Weather Service's downtown rain gauge during the month, the *Rapid City Journal* reported. The previous record was about 5.1 inches in September 1913.

The record was broken thanks to a Sunday-through-Tuesday wet spell that dumped more than 4 inches of rain on the city. The rain fell in periodic showers rather than a single burst, which prevented major flooding.

"A lot of it looks like it soaked in and found places to go," weather service meteorologist Greg Richards said. "If we can keep this moisture in the ground over the winter, it will help the crops out."

Another benefit of the 2.5 inches of rain throughout the Black Hills in recent days is that it has decreased the fire danger from moderate to low, KEVN-TV reported.




Duration of rainfall plays a bigger role than quantity, according to Forest Service fire management officer Chris Stover. "Receiving a couple of inches of rain over a 36- to 48-hour period will definitely put a damper on fire danger," he said.

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