

State targets industry to good effect (Turner)

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By



A nacelle at Goodrich Corp.'s Foley service center, a facility that is part of an industry cluster that continues to grow in Alabama. (Photo courtesy of Goodrich Corp.)

"As manufacturing picks up across the United States, Alabama has become an unexpected beneficiary. The state -- best known for agriculture and textiles production -- is enjoying the best pickup in industrial manufacturing in five years as U.S. and foreign companies flock there."

So opens a recent article by Parija Kavilanz of CNNMoney, who goes on to cite experts who credit "the state's low taxes, top-grade trade schools, a statute that curbs union power, and other incentives" with attracting manufacturers to the state.

The Alabama Department of Commerce (the new name for the Alabama Development Office) reports that 70 new projects promising 4,879 jobs were announced statewide in 2011.

Another 313 current manufacturers announced expansions that could add 12,000 more jobs.

The total promised capital investment exceeds \$4 billion.

According to the state, 747 of the jobs accompany the \$345.3 million in planned investment in Mobile County, and 366 of the jobs and almost \$22.5 million in planned investment is in Baldwin County.

Many of the projects announced locally illustrate the benefits of an increasing effort to target the types of industries Alabama recruits, as they involve aerospace, metals, and maritime or shipbuilding companies.



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Targeting industry clusters is at the heart of the Accelerate Alabama plan that unites state and local recruitment efforts.

It targets advanced manufacturing in the broad sectors of aerospace/defense, automotive/steel, metals, agriculture/food products, forestry products and chemicals. Other targets include bioscience and technology companies, distribution operations and corporate headquarters.

Bill Taylor, head of the nonprofit Economic Development Partnership of Alabama, watched a supplier operation grow in Alabama during his days leading the Mercedes-Benz manufacturing facility near Tuscaloosa.

Supplier networks often employ more people than the plants that draw them to an area. An added benefit, said Taylor, is that the suppliers can make the parent industry more resilient and more firmly grounded in Alabama.

"When we think about the targeted approach, we forget about talking about current businesses and industries," he said. "What is the composition of an industry ... and how do we bring all those parts together, closer, and quite frankly create deeper roots for those companies here."

As the state executes the strategy, Taylor added, education is a key component.

"What we're talking about is advanced manufacturing," he said. "The need for a highly qualified, skilled and developed work force is growing at a rapid pace. One of our largest challenges is to make sure we have the qualified workers to staff the high-tech industries we currently have and the ones out there shopping."

Schools at every level -- K-12, two-year and four-year-- must have a clear picture of the skills Alabama's future workers will need, he said.

"The object," he said, "is creating sustainable, good-paying jobs that will challenge the people of Alabama and that they will find fulfilling.

"You cannot implement a plan like this unless you have that diverse group of people at the same table creating this roadmap. But all of this is for naught if we can't match and align ourselves with the training needs and stay a step ahead in the education system."