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JOBS

Study: Work force key for job development

Area companies need skilled, available workers

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NEWARK -- An economic development study comparing opinions of local business leaders with nationwide responses provided plenty of good news and a warning about the work force.

The potential economic impact of future business investments could approach \$800 million and add 3,760 jobs, according to expansion plans by 73 percent of companies interviewed.

But that's all contingent on companies attracting and hiring the right workers -- those with necessary skills and a good work ethic.

Eric Canada, partner with Blane Canada Research, delivered his company's assessment of Licking County's competitive capacity in economic development Thursday to a group of local business and government leaders.

The opportunity for future economic development in the county appears bright, but filling open positions continues to be a concern, according to interviews with company executives.

Canada's assessment praised the county for worker availability and worker training, but companies still report increasing difficulty filling positions. Some explanations are that the available workers who travel to Columbus, don't have the skills for the open jobs or ignore the job because of a low salary.

In his report, Canada said, "Unfilled positions are an important leading indicator of future work force problems. From the Licking County interviews, it appears unfilled positions are a competitive disadvantage for Licking County.

"What you don't want is companies to get a backlog of positions unfilled," Canada said. "That's what raises the red flag."

Cheri Hottinger, president of the Licking County Chamber of Commerce, participated in some of the interviews and said only certain types of positions seem to remain unfilled.

"From my perspective, those unfilled positions are more specific in nature, like an engineer, and not a general position," Hottinger said. "Franklin County does have a slightly higher wage scale than we do across the board."

Hottinger, like Canada, said increasing gas prices could benefit Licking County by convincing local residents to fill those local jobs instead of driving to Columbus.

"There are many jobs to be had in our county that don't require a college education but require specialized training," Hottinger said.

Rick Platt, executive director of the Heath-Newark-Licking County Port Authority, said the 2000 census showed about 42 percent of the county's work force commutes outside the county for work.

"The key to us is to do a better job of matching up the skills to people leaving Licking County every day," Platt said. "We know the numbers, but we don't know the profile of the commuter."

