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## Skilled work force key to county's future

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NEWARK -- The Licking County work force, which local leaders say has been reliable, will be key to future economic development of the area.

A round-table discussion Wednesday at the Licking County Workforce Summit focused on Ohio employers finding employees with skills needed for the job.

The discussion, one of four Workforce Summit sessions at the Career and Technology Education Centers of Licking County, featured representatives from the Ohio Department of Development, Ohio Board of Regents and Ohio Department of Job and Family Services.

Lisa Patt-McDaniel, director of work force and talent division for the Ohio Department of Development, said the state's population will grow an estimated 1.7 percent by 2020, so employers must focus on training the people already here.

"Our population is not going to grow," Patt-McDaniel said. "More and more, companies are making decisions about whether they can grow based on if they can get the people. If you don't have people that are skilled, then you don't have a company that's successful."

Licking County might be in a better situation than many of Ohio's 88 counties because population growth is expected, especially when the Ohio 161/37 expansion is complete. Its work force gets high marks.

Donna Alvarado, the event's guest speaker and chairman of the Ohio Board of Regents, which oversees higher education in Ohio, said companies are not demanding previously skilled workers for some positions.

"The No. 1 issue for employers in Ohio is the work ethic," Alvarado said. "So many employers say, 'Just give me someone who is going to show up for work on time and be reliable, and I can teach them what they need to know.'"

Steve Finkel, president and owner of UNI-FACS, a Columbus-based steel fabricating company that recently expanded its Heath facility, recently said the work force was the main reason for the company's increased commitment here.

"We're happy with the work ethic of the people in Licking County," Finkel said. "It's a good location because the people we have working for us can get there."

Not only can Finkel's employees get to work, they do have some skills.

"A lot of these (Licking County) kids grow up learning to be welders and fixing stuff, and Columbus kids grow up sitting behind a computer," Finkel said.

As Licking County grows from the west, its challenge is to spread the wealth around the county, unlike Delaware County, Patt-McDaniel said.

"If I were you, I'd look at Delaware County, with very high-income people there on the south end, and the rest of Delaware County is not too far from Appalachia," Patt-McDaniel said. "In the north of the county, many workers are not skilled enough to work in southern Delaware County."

Alvarado said the key to improving the talent level of the work force is education, starting in high school, where they can earn college credit.

Thirty percent of students take remedial math or English in college and pay extra tuition for noncredit courses. Only 25 percent attend college, but a college sits within 30 miles of every Ohioan, Alvarado said.

"How do we need to change and what do we have to give up to attract the 75 percent who have chosen not to walk through those doors?" she asked.

Affordability is an issue, but Gov. Ted Strickland's tuition freeze began addressing that issue, Alvarado said.