

Growing our Economy Through Education

Our state is coming face to face with a crisis in the labor market. Over the past few years, awareness of impending worker shortages has been growing within a wide array of Alaskan industries and professions.

We've already heard a lot about the dire outlook for doctors, nurses and dentists, but the list doesn't stop there. A variety of state and industry task forces have identified which occupations will likely suffer the most acute job vacancies. Besides the health care providers that have received so much press, shortfalls are already showing up in such diverse occupations as computer technicians and programmers, accountants, welders, carpenters, construction managers, heavy equipment operators, engineers, architects, teachers and social service providers. While these current shortages are already disconcerting enough, it is sobering to contemplate the consequences they imply for a project such as the potential gas pipeline.

The problem is bound to grow more critical as Alaska's baby boomers, comprising the bulk of our workforce, soon begin to retire in significant numbers. At the same time, many of our children and grandchildren head south for their education, where job offers, friends and spouses keep them from returning. It is a well-documented phenomenon that students tend to wind up working and settling where they attend college.

In the face of these alarming trends, there has been an encouraging broad-based response within Alaska by industry groups, secondary schools, the university system and state government, often working cooperatively to promote workforce development for the jobs in high demand.

Examples are easy to find. The building industry has collaborated with school districts to sponsor Construction Academies where students combine traditional high school academics with practical construction skills. Trade unions such as the Operating Engineers have beefed up apprenticeship programs to turn out more skilled workers.

At the university level, the response has been even more pronounced. Here in Anchorage, UAA has initiated a phenomenally successful program to attract Alaskan Natives to the fields of science and engineering. The nationally acclaimed nursing program at UAA has launched a recent expansion to help fill the critical shortages already widespread in this profession. Even the legislature has gotten into the act, providing funds to construct UAA's Integrated Science Center and appropriating an extra \$4.2 million last year directed at the University's workforce development programs. And this year the House has already passed a bill that would at least double the slots for Alaskan medical students at WWAMI, UAA's multi-state cooperative medical school.

Many of these new programs are still ramping up and just now beginning to produce dividends in the form of skilled graduates entering our workforce. One of the most critical elements for the eventual success of these programs will be to sustain their funding in the face of intense pressure to cut the state's budget. While we certainly need to find ways to be fiscally responsible, pennywise cuts in these funds would really be pound foolish over the long run, since our state's future revenues depend on growing a healthy economy today.

All the elements are lining up for another significant economic expansion in Alaska, but the benefits will be lasting only if long-term residents are the ones getting the good jobs. Alaskans who consider this state home and really want to pursue successful careers here are the ones who will make long-term investments in homes, families, businesses and institutions, investments that will provide steady economic growth over the years to come. That growth, in turn, will be a source of workers to fill the additional jobs created by an expanding economy.

Development along this path represents a marked shift from our traditional role as supplier of natural resources, to a more mature, diversified and healthy economy. We can influence which path we take by making the right choices today on where we invest our oil revenues. The University has identified labor needs and has proposed programs directed at filling the forecasted labor shortages with Alaskan workers. It is up to the legislature to make the hard choices and fund the appropriate programs.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Berta". The letters are cursive and slightly slanted to the right.

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