

Wanted: A Workforce for the Future

By Federal D. Glover

The Bay Area's work environment is transforming from the blue-collar manufacturing base that helped lead this country to prominence in the 20th century. The new century will see more science-based research and information jobs in the bio-tech and high-tech sectors gain in prominence. However, Contra Costa County, as the second most industrialized county in the state, finds itself with a smaller and smaller workforce for its refineries and manufacturers.

The old-line industries located in the county have been able to survive because they have changed the way they operate. They have adopted new technologies and systems that require high-skilled workers. However, a common complaint among employers is that California is not producing a workforce with the skills needed to compete in the modern world.

In the past in East County, it was common to assume that a job at the local steel plant or chemical plant would be waiting after high school. Today, a high-school education is not enough. Yet not everybody can go to college, nor is a college education necessary in order to obtain a well-paying job. Today's jobs need workers with the specialized knowledge and aptitudes in order to perform in a safe, productive and efficient manner

Much has been written about the need for the state's higher education system to graduate qualified workers and researchers for the high-tech and bio-tech industries. The same problem exists in the so-called blue-collar sector where more and more, workers must be versed in the rapidly changing skills and technological knowledge needed in local industries such as the refineries, energy producers and chemical plants in Contra Costa, Solano and Alameda counties.

These companies that have long been key components in our regional economy are facing a crisis – they can't find new workers to fill the jobs that retiring workers are leaving. If we don't address their needs, these mainstays of our economy may be forced to relocate. One human resources person at a local refinery said he had to interview 600 applicants in order to get 20 qualified people to interview for a single position. Another lamented that in order to fill one highly-paid job, he was forced to hire an out-of-state engineer rather than someone who was already here because local residents did not have the necessary skills for the job. Compounding their dilemma, the out-of-area hires soon find the cost of living in the Bay Area too expensive and they leave after a short period.

Most of these positions are far from the grimy, hot and backbreaking work environments of the past. Most of these workers in the refineries and manufacturing operations are

sitting in front of a computer console, standing in a “Clean Room” or working on finely tuned machinery.

On Nov. 1, Supervisor John Gioia and I introduced an order that proposes the creation of an institute with the advice and help of industry, labor, the county and the Contra Costa Community College. Hopefully, the Institute of Industrial Training will begin helping train and develop the workers needed in this new age in 2006.

The institute will have two parts: a short phase that will help train qualified displaced workers from other fields gain the skills needed in manufacturing and refining and those workers already in the industry upgrade their skills; and a longer program that will give future workers the broad base of knowledge and skills to move into any number of positions at our local industries and plants. While initially helping our refineries, the institute could be expanded to fill the needs of other industries as well.

I have a special affinity for the working man and woman. I come from a union family. My mother worked in the local canneries, and my father was a steelworker. I know the hard work and working conditions they had to endure in order to send me to college. I worked at Dow Chemical for two decades and I know the economic and societal role local industry plays in East County.

The skills and knowledge needed to work at our local plants, mills and refineries have changed. The Institute of Industrial Training will provide the qualified workers for those new jobs so our refiners and manufacturers don't need to look elsewhere for their workers. It is my hope the institute will open new doors for our sons and daughters so that they can have well-paying jobs to buy their homes and raise their families in the same county where they grew up.

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