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“MANUFACTURERS VOICE CONCERNS”

By Holly Angelo

CHICOPEE – Local manufacturers voiced their frustration about facing rising costs in healthcare, job training and utilities during a meeting with the state secretary of Housing and Economic Development and a panel of legislators yesterday.

“Hopefully you gentlemen will go back and remember the little group of manufacturers from Chicopee,” said Paul St. Jean, vice president of operations at Janlynn, a manufacturer of craft products. “We’re basically small manufacturers and we’re basically at the end of our ropes giving money out of our expenses. The frustration you hear is real.”

The Chicopee Chamber of Commerce’s Manufacturers Coalition and Government Affairs Committee sponsored the roundtable meeting, held at Westover Metropolitan Development Corporation headquarters. Secretary Daniel O’Connell and the legislative panel were responsive to the more than dozen manufacturers who attended the meeting and urged them to continue to let Boston know what the issues and needs are.

“If you’re not at the table we’re not going to solve the problems,” O’Connell said at the end of the meeting.

O’Connell agreed that employee health insurance is a challenge with no easy answers. He told the group there is funding available for employee training after one manufacturer mentioned that companies are forced to train unskilled workers.

Carol F. Campbell, President and chief executive officer of Chicopee Industrial Contractors, Inc., said businesses are hit with more taxes and fees. For example, she’s dealing with huge unemployment fees.

“We pay more in fees. The state is not seeing it from our perspective,” Campbell said. “The healthcare and health insurance costs – we have no control over.”

O’Connell was the first to admit it’s expensive to do business in Massachusetts, but he also stressed the state has a reputation of having one of the highest workforce productivity rates.

The talk eventually turned to the life sciences and biotechnology. In June, the governor signed in law a \$1 billion life sciences bill. The 10-year initiative includes funding for capital, research, and tax incentives for certified life sciences projects. The push is to make the state into an international biotechnology leader.

With that said, John G. Moutafis, general manager of United Plastics Group, said it’s time to get manufacturers into the biotechnology loop. Manufacturers are ready to supply all the start-up businesses in that market, Moutafis said.

“What I haven’t seen is a way to tie the manufacturing base into the start-ups,” Moutafis said.

O’Connell said he would set up a meeting on that subject in the coming weeks.

State Rep. Joseph F. Wagner, D-Chicopee, said it’s imperative to keep the lines of communication open.

“We’re serious about this,” Wagner said. “Let’s have a dialogue that is continuous and ongoing. It’s the best mean to an end.”