

GO Virginia Region One
Advanced Manufacturing Working Group Meeting
January 18, 2018, 1:30pm
Virginia Highlands Small Business Incubator, Room 107

In Attendance:

Lennie Gail Mitcham, The Southwest Virginia Alliance for Manufacturing
Susan Copeland, Virginia Coalfield Economic Development Authority
Sam Wolford, Genedge
Te-Kai Shu, Strongwell
Melinda Leland, Virginia Highlands Community College
John Kilgore, Scott County Economic Development
Andrew Barnes, UVa-Wise
Becki Joyce, UVa-Wise
Whitney Bonham, Washington County, Virginia
Mary Ann Holbrook, United Way of Southwest Virginia
Mandy Rust-Barker, The Southwest Virginia Alliance for Manufacturing

In Attendance Via Phone:

Rachel Patton, Southwest Virginia Workforce Development Board
Marty Holiday, New River/Mount Rogers Workforce Development Board
Kimber Simmons, New River/Mount Rogers Workforce Development Board
Joe Gillespie, Virginia Economic Development Authority
Tommy Clements, Mountain Empire Community College
Vickie Ratliff, Mountain Empire Community College
James Dye, Southwest Virginia Community College
Stephanie Surret, SVAM Center of Excellence

1) Welcome and Introductions

Lennie Gail Mitcham, Executive Director of The Southwest Virginia Alliance for Manufacturing Inc., welcomed everyone to the meeting and led the room in introductions.

2) Review of GO Virginia Project Guidelines

Becki Joyce explained that GO VA is a bipartisan business-led economic development initiative that breaks the state up into nine regions. Southwest Virginia is Region 1. The Region 1 Council looks for ways to grow and diversify the economy and industry in our area. The four industry targets are human talent, workforce, infrastructure, and innovation.

GO Virginia has money for grant funding, with the next set of applications due February 5th. Applications will be due thirty days prior to Council meetings and a letter of intent is due sixty days prior. In 2018, the Council will meet on March 6th, June 5th, October 2nd, and December 4th. In addition to this funding there is another pot of money for the entire state. The first step when apply for funding is for applications to be submitted and vetted at UVA Wise. If an application is approved it is submitted to the regional board. The board will then decide if it should be recommended to the state.

3) Review of Working Group Guidelines

The GO Virginia Advanced Manufacturing Work Team was originally the Advanced Manufacturing Blueprint Implementation Team. With the goals and structure of both groups so closely related, it made sense to transition the group to serve the needs of Go Virginia.

The purpose of the group is to serve as the advisory group that will guide conversations, project ideas and planning outcomes in regard to manufacturing. Ms. Joyce stated she could inform the group of what is going on outside of the group and in other working groups. The grant committee will be looking for crossover between working groups.

4) Working Group Member Criteria Discussion

Ms. Mitcham and Ms. Joyce led a discussion on the criteria set forth by GO Virginia for the Working Team from the document, "GO Virginia Region One Council Working Group Guidelines". During the discussion of the Working Group roles, it was determined that Ms. Mitcham will serve as the representative to participate with other groups quarterly in a combined working group led meeting and primarily serve as the Team representative at GO Virginia Region One Council meetings. They also discussed the need for participating at the annual SWVA Economic Forum. Each Working Group will have a breakout session at the economic forum May 17th.

The group then discussed the composition criteria. Upon review of the criteria and current participants, it was determined that the group still needs a K-12 representative - Barry Yost was suggested to fill this criteria -, another manufacturing representative, and a disruptor/innovator. Ms. Joyce described a disruptor/innovator as someone pushing the envelope in manufacturing or ideas of future trends, or a forward thinker. Ms. Mitcham stated that she will work to find individuals to meet the missing criteria.

5) Current Initiatives or Potential Projects

Ms. Joyce stated there were no current initiatives or potential projects related to manufacturing for Region 1. There is an official grant application form online. When asked, it was determined that nobody in the meeting had heard of any manufacturing related projects in the works.

In regard to advanced manufacturing ideas Stephanie Surret, Executive Director of the SVAM Center of Excellence, stated VHCC is getting ready to kickoff the first accelerated Level 1 program, as more companies move towards automation they will need more fast track programs. A viable project could possibly be a shared instructor.

Marty Holiday, Executive Director of the New River/Mount Rogers Workforce Development Board, explained the Pathways to American Dream Grant which focuses on Advanced Manufacturing IT and would cover Planning Districts 1, 2, and 3.

Rachel Patton spoke about working with technical schools, community colleges, and Centers of Excellence for short term welding cohorts, then placing graduates from the cohorts in employment.

6) Project Brainstorm

Ms. Joyce asked about the top challenges facing manufacturers. Te-Kai Shu from Strongwell discussed the top challenges faced by his company. He feels the top challenge is recruiting and retaining talent. Strongwell has a retiring workforce and is losing their experience. It is difficult to find people to fill the experienced positions. They are also seeing more turn over on the manufacturing floor. The average tenure at Strongwell used to be fifteen years and now it is 3-5 years.

Mr. Shu feels the way candidates are recruited is important. Strongwell is reaching out to new graduates and offering internships. They now offer 10-12 hour a week internships to accommodate new college schedules, giving some flexibility with the option to work from home for a couple hours. They are also pushing for the recruitment of minorities and females.

Strongwell is looking at apprenticeships/residencies where the student/employee works at different manufacturing facilities. Hopefully this experience will help to fight the stigma around the industry.

Mr. Shu believes talent is leaving because that is the new game of the workforce. People are changing jobs for a quarter an hour, they want new titles and change. In an effort to combat this, Strongwell has started quarterly reviews and ask what skills the employees want to learn. They reach out to employees to see if they are interested in another department and are trying to integrate departments.

Whitney Bonham agreed that if millennials are going to stay in a job, they want a place where they can grow and learn.

Mr. Shu stated Strongwell will bring in outside trainers and suggested GO Virginia should expand the depth and breadth of trainings offered.

Ms. Mitcham shared that the roundtable discussions have echoed the issue of recruitment and retention of talent, the aging workforce and exodus of experience. Ms. Holiday agreed that talent has been a major discussion.

Ms. Joyce stated that she had not heard anything that could be turned into a project. She suggested there might be a marriage between agriculture and advanced manufacturing because of the way farmers have to fix and maintain their own equipment. The dream goal would be to bring in a John Deere manufacturing facility. Ms. Bonham informed the group there is already a project recruiting dairy industries to Virginia, seven counties are already participating.

John Kilgore pointed out that the aging workforce came from agriculture or the military and could already work on anything. He stated the current challenge is everything going to technology and it is difficult to get millennials into agriculture. Ms. Bonham suggested the 4-H soft skills training in agriculture would be transferrable to manufacturing.

7) Meeting Frequency and Next Meeting Date/Location

After a discussion, the Group agreed to meet every other month from 1:30-3:00 at the Virginia Highlands Small Business Incubator in Abingdon, Virginia. The group to ensure meeting coincided the GO Virginia Grant Deadlines.

The next meeting is scheduled for March 22nd at 1:30pm at the Virginia Highlands Small Business Incubator, Room 107.

The meeting ended at 2:45pm.