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Push is on for skills

By Richard Craver | JOURNAL REPORTER

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As the Triad tries to secure a larger place on the national aerospace map, Timco's decision to make passenger-aircraft seating, galleys and lavatories in Wallburg is adding to the critical mass — and up to 500 jobs by 2018.

Carter, Timco's co-chief executive, is proud that Timco is keeping the project in the Triad. But he said he can't help worrying about whether Timco will find 191 qualified employees to cover the first year of production, which is to begin in the first quarter.

Timco, based in Greensboro, has about 1,800 employees in the Triad, including the 400 it has already hired this year for its aircraft maintenance and overhaul operations at Piedmont Triad International Airport.

Yet Carter said "we can't hire enough qualified people here and in Macon (Ga.) right now. We're about 300 short across the entire system, and that keeps me up at night, given our opportunities."

Triad industry and economic officials acknowledge the challenge is daunting in the short term.

A survey by the Greensboro Economic Development Alliance projected that more than 1,700 jobs would be needed in the Triad's aviation industry from January 2008 through January 2013. That estimate doesn't include the 500 new Timco jobs.

The aerospace-worker shortage was heightened during a public spat between Timco and Honda Aircraft Co., the parent of HondaJet, in 2008.

Timco accused Honda of targeting some of its engineers soon after announcing plans in 2007 for a HondaJet operation at PTI that would need 283 employees. Timco also said that a state incentives package to HondaJet gave it a wage advantage. Honda denied Timco's allegations.

Timco is eligible for \$1.5 million in local incentives and nearly \$2 million in state incentives for the

aircraft-interiors plant.

The spat spurred local stakeholders in the Triad's aerospace industry to begin discussing how to resolve the shortage of qualified workers, said David Powell, who recently took over as chief executive of the Piedmont Triad Partnership.

Dede Smyth, a spokeswoman for B/E Aerospace Inc., said that the company has added about 200 jobs to its Winston-Salem operations in the past four years. "We have had success in finding and hiring the skill sets we need," Smyth said.

Carter said that North Carolina and the Triad "are doing a great job marketing the industry."

"I'm just concerned we may be outstripping our ability to meet the demand for qualified workers for existing companies and those thinking of expanding or landing here."

Community college programs

Triad officials are encouraged that local community colleges are expanding their aviation and aerospace programs.

For example, the aviation school at Guilford Technical Community College has Federal Aviation Administration certification approval to train up to 450 students annually — more than a threefold increase since 2008.

"We can provide all of them with the training to plug into the aerospace industry," said Ed Frye, the chairman of the Transportation Systems Technology division at GTCC. "But we can only take so many students at a time, and the fastest we can teach them is 11 weeks."

Local officials hope that Timco's expansion, and potential growth spurts at B/E, FedEx Corp. and HondaJet, will be enough to convince displaced furniture and textile workers that their hands-on skills are needed in a 21st-century manufacturing environment.

Among the skills needed are metal working, riveting and welding, and handling engineering and technical calculations. The annual salary range for aerospace jobs is from \$30,000 to more than \$70,000 — comparable, if not better, than most local non-tobacco-production jobs.

Carter is rallying support for making the Triad the "furnishings capital of aircraft interiors," treating a pod-seat for an airplane geared toward overseas flights like a high-end recliner.

"The link between the region's preeminence in furnishings and the growth of the aviation interiors sector in the Triad is no stretch at all," said John H. Boyd, a principal with The Boyd Co. Inc., a site-location consulting company in New Jersey. "It's a step up in the food chain but a perfectly logical transition."

\$1.45 million grant for GTCC

One key resource — a \$1.45 million grant from the Golden Leaf Foundation awarded last November — will be presented to GTCC at noon Wednesday.

The grant is part of the foundation's Opportunities for Work in Aerospace Manufacturing initiative.

Frye said that part of the grant will go toward assisting the state's JobLink program with conducting pre-employment assessments, and to help find former manufacturing workers who are

unemployed or underemployed for their skills.

Another part involves the aviation-manufacturing program at the Career Center in Winston-Salem/Forsyth County Schools, and the machine-manufacturing program in Guilford County Schools. The programs are offering FAA-certified courses that can count toward earning college credits at GTCC.

“We’re hoping that will help get some of these kids in our automotive program hooked and thinking about a career in aviation, and encourage more aviation companies to look at us as an employee source,” said Bruce Sherman, the director of career technical education for Winston-Salem/Forsyth County Schools.

North Carolina is quickly becoming the East Coast state for aerospace, said John Kasarda, an aviation expert and professor at the Kenan-Flagler Business School at UNC Chapel Hill. “Being a prominent provider of the education for the industry would help it form deep roots here.”

Carter said he believes the future is bright for aerospace in the Triad once a worker pool is established.

“When we get to the point where the work-force needs for every existing aerospace company is being met, there is a pool of candidates and new waves of workers are constantly being trained, then you’ll really see the potential for this industry,” Carter said.

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