
EDITORIALS & LETTERS

Help wanted

Series will explore work force challenges

A primary reason the state decided to build a new psychiatric hospital near Junction City is because Lane County has a deep pool of workers with the skills that will be needed to run the place. That work force advantage gave the Junction City site the edge over properties elsewhere in Oregon that were easier to develop.

There's a larger lesson here: Lane County can expect to attract and retain employers if it has a work force capable of meeting their requirements. And there's a warning: Employers will locate or expand elsewhere if workers with the right skills and training are not available.

In a series of columns starting today on the opposite page, people who understand various aspects of this lesson will describe the challenges Lane County faces in ensuring that its work force will provide a solid foundation of a strong local economy.

Several challenges are converging. One is demographic: Retirement is on the horizon for the generation of workers in their late 40s and 50s. This generational pig in the occupational python is big: Half of all wood products workers are 45 years of age or older, as are nearly half of workers in the health care field.

Even in occupations with a

broader age distribution, older workers tend to fill a disproportionate number of management positions. Lane County will need to find ways to replace retiring workers — or induce older workers to stay on the job.

Another challenge is technological: Work place skills quickly can become outdated. It's estimated that 75 percent of workers will need some form of retraining just to keep their current jobs. A fast-changing economy means that most workers will change jobs in the course of their careers and will need to learn new skills each time. Trained workers in many fields are scarce already — 80 percent of manufacturers report difficulty finding skilled employees.

Then there's the educational challenge: Many students are not learning the skills they'll need to find employment and succeed in the work place.

Lane County's response to these challenges will shape the local economy in the years to come — indeed, as the siting of the mental hospital shows, the work force is affecting big economic decisions already.

It's vital that work force issues confronting government, employers, schools, workers and families be understood so that effective action can follow. It's our hope that the series will add to that understanding.