

By Brie Handgraaf

bhandgraaf@wilsontimes.com | 252-265-7821

ROCKY MOUNT — Community leaders from five counties gathered Tuesday night to learn more about an initiative that will equip local residents with the skills to fill advanced manufacturing vacancies with current companies as well as those expanding into the region.

“Our area employers need a skilled workforce to meet their hiring needs and to allow them to expand in the future. The search for talent does not stop at any single city or county line, and the RAMP East partnership helps to coordinate local and regional training efforts to produce high quality graduates for area manufacturers,” Upper Coastal Plain Council of Government Executive Director Robert Hiett said “A region that is able to provide a skilled workforce is more competitive and it is more likely to see new business expansion that benefits all the communities within it.”

TRAINING WORKERS

The Regional Advanced Manufacturing Pipeline for eastern North Carolina is an initiative across 10 counties to implement a curriculum at eight community colleges that will train 800 people by June with the hard and soft skills needed to work for area manufacturers.

“The RAMP East program was created out of necessity. Opportunity knocked on the door of eastern North Carolina with about 3,500 jobs committed in Nash and Edgecombe counties by the end of next year,” said Carolinas Gateway Partnership CEO Norris Tolson. “When the companies started scouting who they could hire into those jobs, we realized we needed to do some work and sheer necessity forced us to form RAMP East.”Community colleges throughout the region developed curriculum by working with area employers, and on Wednesday, eight students ranging from 21 to 56 years old completed Wilson Community College’s first course.

The school off Herring Avenue plans to have a second cohort start on Feb. 3 with night classes on weeknights through March 19. Once complete, participants will receive 96 hours ranging from an introduction to manufacturing, math, workplace safety and more. “By and large, our economy is at full throttle and it is continuing to grow exponentially, but

CEOs are still looking for talent, and it is imperative that RAMP East is successful and community colleges are at full capacity to churn out trainable employees,”

N.C. Commerce Secretary Anthony M. Copeland said during the Council of Government’s annual meeting. Copeland said leaders from across the state often ask about the program, which he said hopes can be replicated in other communities. N.C. Community College System Vice President of Economic Development Maureen Little said the collaborative effort of RAMP East is one that should be replicable from Manteo to Murphy.

“I have no doubt that all RAMP East members are committed to the job we have before us,” she said. “We all believe education and training are the economic equalizers among all individuals and why we do what we do. At the end of the day, each of these members and partner organizations want to leave North Carolina a better place than we found it, and I think, through RAMP East, we’re going to do it.”

WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

The Council of Governments is the regional economic development district for Wilson, Edgecombe, Nash, Halifax and Northampton counties. While the organization headquartered in downtown Wilson provides assistance with aging services and planning for municipalities, workforce development accounts for nearly half the budget, and Wilson County’s chunk of that pie is the largest of the five counties. Hiett said Tuesday’s meeting was the 34th annual event, which has grown considerably in recent years from around 100 people to 215 attendees at the Rocky Mount Event Center. There were a number of attendees, including Wilson Forward Executive Director Paula Benson, who split time between the annual meeting and the Home of Future Thinking conference at Rocky Mount Mills.

“I appreciated the opportunity to join two events where community leaders were engaged in conversations that reflect deviations from some of the more traditional approaches to community and economic development,” Benson said. “Both events, which were only a couple of miles apart, certainly highlighted the importance of regional collaboration, and I considered both gatherings significant to our work in Wilson.”

Visit <https://rampeast.com/> to learn more about RAMP East or call Wilson Community College at 252-246-1287 to enroll. Visit www.ucpcog.org/ to learn more about the council of government's work.