

Valley looks to trade up

By TOM VAN DUSEN, Ottawa Sun

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PEMBROKE — With tough competition coming from other communities, skilled workers are almost in as much demand and being pursued almost as vigorously as doctors, who are being offered bonuses, clinics, hospital privileges and other incentives to relocate to the Ottawa Valley.

The partially successful physician hunt has been in effect for several years. More recently, Renfrew County's economic development services department has teamed with the Labour Market Group of Renfrew and Lanark to go after tradespeople.

In a related thrust, the agencies are trying to reach local young people to help convince them to get into the trades and stay in the Valley, rather than take off for the perceived promised land of the big cities.

An addition to the local landscape bound to help keep kids at home is a new 80,000 sq.-ft. Algonquin College campus to be built along the Ottawa River waterfront here. Costing \$36 million and to be completed by the fall of 2012, it'll feature expanded skilled trades training.

With a nationwide gap in the skilled workforce of about one million warm bodies, competition is fierce, said county economic development manager Mitch Wilkie, adding that local companies are examining sharing skilled workers to help lighten the load.

While manufacturers may need to stagger production or scheduled maintenance shutdowns as workers move between plants, it's better than the alternative ... no access at all to the skilled help needed.

"Two unrelated companies in town are already doing it, with an engineer working half the week at one place and half at the other," Wilkie observed. "Both companies would prefer the expertise full time, but are prepared to settle for this arrangement for now."

The recent push to round up new workers started last spring with a Skilled Labour Roundtable to examine specific challenges, their effects, possible solutions and results achieved.

Then came a six-month online survey to inventory current skilled tradespeople and apprentice needs. As an incentive for businesses to participate, a draw was held for an iPod Nano which was won by Michael St. Jean of St. Jean Flooring.

"The survey revealed extreme shortages in key occupations such as operating engineers, millwrights, machinists, industrial electricians, automotive technicians, welders and most building trades," Wilkie noted.

Two major users of skilled workers are CFB Petawawa and Atomic Energy of Canada Ltd. at Chalk River, said labour market group executive director Matt LeMay. AECL is almost always short of physicists, engineers, instrument mechanics and steamfitters.

The next task will be to create a regularly updated Ottawa Valley industrial profile outlining the opportunities for skilled workers.

"Profile information will be marketed both locally and internationally using a variety of promotional and multi-media tools," said LeMay, who believes up-to-date technology can help the county maintain a competitive edge in attracting skilled workers.

As part of the push, Ottawa Valley companies will need increased exposure to provincial and federal programs that support skilled trades training and development, Wilkie said.