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Created: Tuesday, July 5, 2011 5:30 a.m. CDT

Borek: Manufacturing crucial to county's future

Well-known for its strong agricultural base, DeKalb County has some of the best soil and most productive farmland in the world. Northern Illinois University is a powerful economic engine for DeKalb County and northern Illinois.

The report, "NIU and our Region's Prosperity," and the supplement, "NIU and DeKalb County's Prosperity," quantified the importance of NIU employment, expenditures and students to our region and county.

What is less known, but of particular importance to the future of the DeKalb County economy, is the significance of manufacturing.

Manufacturing is the largest generator of gross domestic product in DeKalb County, according to the NIU Center for Governmental Studies. In addition, the manufacturing sector is the largest source of jobs that pay above-average wages in the county.

DeKalb County has a significantly higher concentration of employment in several distinct manufacturing business sectors than the average for counties when adjusted for population. The sectors exhibiting particularly high concentration include primary metals, fabricated metal products, machinery, computer and electronic products, plastics and rubber products. Some of the larger DeKalb County manufacturers include Ideal Industries, Tegrant Corp., DeKalb Forge Co., SK Express, Auto Meter Products, The Suter Co., Sycamore Systems and Tate & Lyle.

Several manufacturers have expanded during the past year. Ideal Industries acquired three hand tool manufacturing companies. Tegrant, Tate & Lyle, Elgiloy and SK Express expanded onsite and Algus acquired a nearby building. Additional expansions are planned. In DCEDC's Voice of Industry report, 59 percent of the companies surveyed indicated they planned to expand during the next three years.

The attributes that contribute to the success of local manufacturers are attracting new companies to DeKalb County. Three new manufacturing facilities have been completed or were under construction during the last 12 months: SK Hand Tool, Smart Motion Robotics and H.A. Phillips. Another firm,

Production Cutting Services, expanded into an existing building.

There are several factors coming together to make a case that manufacturing is an opportunity for us to affect our economic well-being. First, Chicago Federal Reserve Bank economist William Strauss indicated that manufacturing has and will continue to lead the recovery. Second, given that DeKalb County has a strong manufacturing base, we are poised for growth given our location on Interstate 88 at the edge of the Metro Chicago region and the center of the Interstate 39 Industrial Corridor.

These, combined with the record above, make DeKalb attractive to the site selectors, the professionals who are most influential in helping companies decide where to locate.

However, without a capable and eager workforce, our efforts will ring hollow. We need to show our young people that the manufacturing industry holds a bright future for them. Resources must be well managed. A group of local manufacturers is working with Kishwaukee College to share information about career opportunities and to promote its Automated Engineering Technology Program.

It should be a great introduction for people looking for exciting and rewarding careers with good pay and benefits.

Be sure to watch for the news of the program as it unfolds.

• *Paul Borek is executive director of the DeKalb County Economic Development Corp.*