

Publication: Kenosha News;Date: Nov 18, 2009;Section: Local News;Page: 5



Panel learns about viability of green jobs

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Companies have been scrambling to hire wind energy technicians from Lakeshore Technical College even before they graduate, said Mike Lanser, school president.

The competition for turbine and related technology students shows the demand for "green," or environmentally supportive, jobs, Lancer told the Wisconsin legislative Committee on Small Business, Emergency Preparedness, Technical Colleges and Consumer Protection on Tuesday.

The committee, chaired by Bob Wirch, D-Pleasant Prairie, met at Gateway Technical College's Kenosha campus to hear details about tech school programs dealing with renewable energy and green jobs as well as what's being done to help dislocated workers.

Lanser said Lakeshore, serving east-central Wisconsin in Cleveland, has 52 students enrolled in the school's new wind energy classes, with 13 graduating in May.

Mike Underhill, a United Auto Workers Local 72 representative and electrician but speaking on his own behalf, told the committee there are plenty of out-of-work electricians from the Chrysler Kenosha Engine plant and in northern Illinois who could fill the need for such technicians.

"They are qualified and wouldn't need much training to get them up to speed," said Hill, who expects to lose his job when the automaker closes the local plant in December 2010. "We need good-paying jobs here, and to keep the ones we have."

Dan Clancy, Wisconsin Technical College System president, said studies in the state have shown there will be a need to train people for jobs in energy, water, wind and geothermal renewable sources.

Conor Smyth, Wisconsin Technical College System policy adviser, said the state's 16 districts saw 25 percent enrollment growth between 1999 and 2009, including many adults returning to school after losing their jobs. He said predictions are for another 15 percent growth in students by next fall.

Smyth said the schools have helped dislocated workers receive training by:

Adding courses, staff and teaching times and space.

Waiving limits on students per class.

Streamlining financial aid.

Seeking additional government funds.

Waiving enrollment and application fees.

Paul Gabriel, with the schools districts' board association, said businesses now are working with tech colleges to assist affected employees before they are laid off.

He said people out of work for the first time in decades are scared.

They don't know what to do, what occupation to pursue and haven't sat in a classroom, especially for math and science, in years and might be hesitant to return to school, he said.

"We're trying to break down that barrier," he said.