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Treasure Coast officials see manufacturing as opportunity for job growth

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ST. LUCIE COUNTY — Nationwide, manufacturing has been the broken nose of a beat-up economy.

But like a broken nose, Treasure Coast officials say the wound will heal, even if the facial feature looks a little different after recovery.

The U.S. lost nearly a third of its 16.5 million manufacturing jobs from 2000 to 2009. Florida lost almost 30 percent of its 415,435 manufacturing jobs during that time period, according to data released by the U.S. Census in June.

St. Lucie County had 2,768 manufacturing jobs in 2000, but only 2,408 manufacturing jobs in 2009 as manufacturers struggled with overseas competition, though the county grew by 85,094 residents from 2000 to 2010, according U.S. Census data.

Treasure Coast officials see manufacturing as an opportunity for job growth. But future manufacturing jobs might look different, said Crystal Stiles, the co-director of the Business Development Board of Martin County.

"It's not smokestacks and big billowing gray skies," Stiles said. "It's green. It's clean."

Despite the difficulties, some manufacturers are growing. Local counties offer tax incentives and cash incentives for job growth for qualified targeted industries. Sometimes that includes manufacturers.

Stuart-based American Energy Innovations is promising to create 600 jobs as part of a nearly \$4 million county and state incentive deal announced in April. The company just started hiring to build turbine components.

Tropicana, of Fort Pierce, last month announced a \$60 million expansion that will be used for equipment. Boat builder Twin Vee, also of Fort Pierce, has plans to add 75 jobs during the next five years. Fort Pierce-based Pursuit Boats has launched six new lines of boats in the last 15 months, said David Glenn, the company's marketing manager.

The Treasure Coast manufacturing base has different industries, including boat

builders, juice makers and jet engine part manufacturers. Most of the manufacturers employ fewer than 100 people.

In the future, residents might see an increase in pharmaceutical companies and medical device makers.

The Treasure Coast's advantages include its climate, affordable real estate, a large employee base that fits the general skill set needed in manufacturing as well as programs at Indian River State College designed to prepare students for careers in the field.

Soon, Florida also will benefit from the planned expansion of the Panama Canal and the dredging of the Port of Miami to make shipping more efficient for the region, said South Florida Manufacturers Association Executive Director Tom Kennedy. The association is a nonprofit trade organization.

Glenn said the key to staying afloat is not having too much debt, reinvesting in the company and maintaining integrity. Though retail boat sales have fallen, Pursuit has aggressively made new products, Glenn said. The company employs about 200 people.

Some companies, such as TurboCombustor Technology Inc. of Stuart offer a broad base of services, while companies such as boat manufacturers focus on specialized niche markets.

Regardless, existing manufacturers had to have a good business plan or else they'd be out of work, said Larry Pelton, the president of the Economic Development Council of St. Lucie.

"Manufacturers have to adjust based on demand, and they have to do it quickly," Pelton said. "They have to be able to identify increases or declines in demand for their products far in advance of everybody else because they have to be able to adjust their production based on what their demand is for their products."

Challenges exist for the industry with increased foreign competition, difficulty in raising money to spend on new equipment and a lack of local raw materials.

Future manufacturing probably will rely more on technology.

"Manufacturing probably won't be nearly as labor intensive as it used to be," Pelton said. "It'll be more technology intensive, so what you'll see is fewer employees but a higher value added per employee."

Meanwhile, companies must adjust to an aging population that is more apt to save than spend, said Roger Dunshee, the owner of Fort Pierce-based Twin Vee Catamarans. The demographic shift has hurt the demand for products because people are saving money for retirement they otherwise would spend.

Dunshee sold the boatbuilding business in 2003 before buying the company back in 2008 and reopened it in 2010.

"Everybody tells me I was absolutely out of my mind to open a manufacturing company in 2010 ... and I agreed," Dunshee said with a laugh.

Dunshee said targeting new markets and having products at affordable prices for the struggling economy has helped.

But maintaining a talented workforce also is difficult.

Even though the number of manufacturing jobs has fallen, the industry had the third-highest payroll in 2009 among sectors of the U.S. economy behind health care and social assistance and finance and insurance.

Still, at an Oct. 18 meeting, manufacturing leaders in Martin County told U.S. Rep. Tom Rooney they had trouble finding qualified workers.

And workers aren't always sure manufacturing jobs have the same luster they once did.

Port St. Lucie resident Kevin Funicello, 49, began his career working for General Motors in 1981 and has bounced around a number of different manufacturing companies. Currently employed by a small manufacturing company in Port St. Lucie, Funicello said he would choose a different field if he had to do it all over again because of the decline in job security, pay and industry morale. Funicello said he has advised his son to work in the public sector.

"People in trades aren't revered," he said. "They aren't looked upon as being pillars of society. Back in the old days, my father was in World War II, back then, we built ships. We built tanks. People were proud of what they did."

Top manufacturers in St. Lucie County

Here are a list of top manufacturers in St. Lucie County and how many they employ.

Company.....	Employees
Tropicana Products.....	249-500
Chambers Truss.....	100-249
Coca Cola Bottling.....	100-249
Diamond R Fertilizer.....	100-249
Maverick Boats.....	100-249

Pursuit Boats.....100-249

Hewes Manufacturing.....100-249

Source: 2010 data from State Agency for Workforce Innovations provided by St. Lucie County

Manufacturing decline

Nearly five million manufacturing jobs have vanished from 2000 to 2009 according to the U.S. Census Bureau. Here's a look at how the differences between 2000 and 2009.

Location.....	Jobs in 2000.....	Jobs in 2009.....	Decline/Gain
U.S.	16,473,994.....	11,632,956.....	-4,841,038
Florida.....	415,435.....	294,519.....	-120,916
Brevard County.....	17,730.....	19,994.....	2,264
Indian River County.....	2,668.....	1,805.....	-863
Martin County.....	2,534.....	2,444.....	-90
Okeechobee County.....	151.....	215.....	64
Palm Beach County.....	23,582.....	11,166.....	-12,416
St. Lucie County.....	2,768.....	2,408.....	-360

Source: U.S. Census Bureau



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