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My Turn: Deborah Ruggiero: R.I.'s new skilled manufacturing

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By Deborah Ruggiero

Manufacturing in Rhode Island is alive and well, but not the manufacturing from the days of our grandparents. Technology has changed how we do business and how we live.

Today's manufacturing requires knowledge in technology, math, ladder logic, G-code, lean manufacturing principles and CAD programs. Manufacturing represents 15 percent of Rhode Island's economy, with more than 1,600 manufacturers ranging from sole proprietors to companies with more than 100 employees.

The No. 1 challenge I hear from manufacturers is finding qualified job candidates to expand their business. The biggest asset of any company is its people. And let's be real, because not every high school student is going to college. That's why the Governor's Manufacturing Initiative in this year's budget is so important. The General Assembly approved \$3.65 million to upgrade Davies Career and Technical High School to create a state-of-the-art Advanced Manufacturing Center.

Investing in manufacturing to train high school students exposes them to careers that will help them in the future. It also helps manufacturers — from craft breweries to precision manufacturers — employ a skilled and qualified workforce to meet the demand of their customers.

Many young people don't know what opportunity looks like today. The new manufacturing in Rhode Island is in defense, marine and infrastructure

technology and cybersecurity. Rhode Island is a defense and undersea technology leader not just in New England but throughout the country.

Everyone starts somewhere. I suggest talking with Dave Chenevert at Rhode Island Manufacturers Association and enrolling in its apprentice program called We Make RI. It has a 95-percent graduation rate and RIMA gets its apprentices jobs (www.WeMakeRI.com).

More young people should tour Taylor Box in Warren and talk to Dan Shedd, owner of a third-generation family business. He's survived recessions, expanded his manufacturing facility, and continues to look for good talent for his growing business in this new economy.

Let's drive economic growth by creating a skilled workforce while expanding manufacturing in Rhode Island. It's the future. It's the new economy. It's good-paying jobs and in our own backyard.

Deborah Ruggiero is a Democratic state representative from Jamestown. She is chairwoman of the Small Business Committee and serves on the House Finance Committee.

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