

“Unless technological skills, engineering and science become more popular with students, there may not be enough workers to keep electricity and heating fuels flowing to homes and businesses within seven years, a panel of education and industry leaders agreed Tuesday.”

Energy industry fears skills shortage

Panel faults schools, focus on glamour jobs

BY R.J. KELLY
Gazette Reporter

Unless technological skills, engineering and science become more popular with students, there may not be enough workers to keep electricity and heating fuels flowing to homes and businesses within seven years, a panel of education and industry leaders agreed Tuesday.

“It’s part of this elitism that we have to change,” said Barry Weinberg, president of Fulton-Montgomery Community College. “Eighty percent of jobs in the future will not require bachelor’s degrees, but they will require highly specialized training,” he said.

FMCC is in the midst of several

projects to help train technology workers for realistic needs, Weinberg said.

Widespread worries that the energy industry will soon face a serious shortage as long-time skilled employees retire is why Assemblyman Paul Tonko said he brought together about 15 educators and industry professionals to seek solutions. Tonko, D-Amsterdam, chairs the Assembly Energy Committee.

Industry participants ranged from GE’s Global Research Center in Niskayuna to Scotia-based Buhrmaster Energy Group, a third-generation family company supplying heating fuels to seven Capital Region counties.

With about 25 service technicians and 25 drivers, James Buhr-

master said his company has developed its own training program for new workers.

“A better job needs to be done at the high school level,” Buhrmaster said. “We need people who can work with their hands.”

The heart of the problem, several panel participants agreed, is that despite good pay and benefits, fewer and fewer high school students see jobs like power project engineers or technology technicians as “glamorous.”

Several also faulted the schools from kindergarten through high school for not fostering math, science and basic writing skills needed for engineering.

“We need to reach them, and train the teachers,” said S.S. Mani Venkata, dean of Clarkson Uni-

versity’s school of engineering.

He said about 65,000 engineers were produced in the United States last year — down 10,000 in three years.

“China is going to produce 10 times that this year,” and India will produce 300,000, he said.

Education in math and science is more valued in Asia and Europe, said Elaine Weinstein, a senior vice president of Brooklyn-based KeySpan, a major Northeast electric power producer and natural gas distributor.

Demand for line workers will grow by 9 percent a year, Weinstein said, with 10,000 new jobs available by 2010.

With the average age of utility workers now 48, and many nearing retirement, the industry is about to lose a major pool of experienced workers.

ALBANY

While agreeing the energy industry faces a workforce challenge, Steve Labate, a pay and benefits manager for GE’s Global Research Center, said the growth of wind and solar power systems offer hope.

“There is an opportunity here to attract young folks,” Labate said. “Kids like to work on what’s new and exciting.”

Tuesday’s forum was the first of what Tonko said he hopes will be a continuing series to help develop new state and educational strategies.

Reach Gazette reporter R.J. Kelly at 395-3198 or rjkelly@dailygazette.net.