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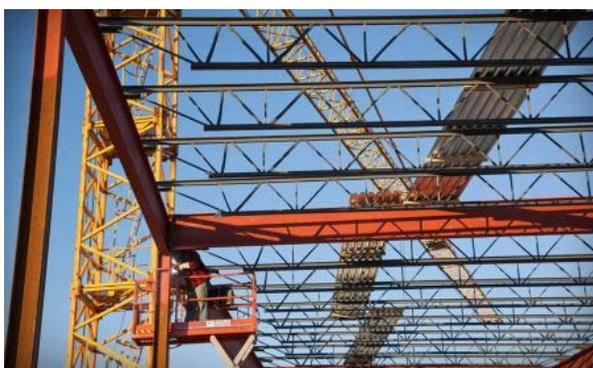
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Chicago's Metal Cluster

By Gretchen Salois



Hoping to hone in on manufacturing potential in Illinois, preferential standing could translate into funding

July 2014 - The premise that toying around with a concept or idea can end up as a viable and useful product is lacking today. Self-educated mad scientists or metalworkers aren't groomed for greatness. People who work with their hands are often deemed working class or mere hobbyists, and less than practical. The Chicago Metro Metal Consortium Manufacturing Community is putting the word out that there is endless potential in a manufacturing career.



The federal government chose Chicago as one of 12 preferred regions that can apply for part of \$1.3 billion in funds earmarked for manufacturing development. While the decision by the Investing in Manufacturing Communities Partnership does not automatically ensure funding for members of the Chicago Metro Metal Consortium or individual companies, it makes it more likely that consortium members will be able to compete successfully.

"As we embark on further evolving the role of the consortium, we hope to leverage additional support at the federal, state, local and philanthropic levels," says Michael Jasso, Cook County director of planning and development.

Work done by the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning, independent industry groups and researchers, indicate there are 100,000 people now working in the metals/manufacturing sector in Chicago. "We will be working with our partners to enhance the regional presence of the cluster through the development of coordinated strategies in activities such as export promotion and career training to meet the needs of our many and diverse employers," Jasso says.

Getting the word out about job opportunities and career paths in manufacturing and metalworking is the main aim of the consortium. "We hope young people will increasingly realize that

the metals sectors offer challenging and fulfilling jobs through which they can grow and prosper throughout their lives," Jasso says.

"There is a growing realization and re-appreciation for the importance of manufacturing in the U.S.," he continues. "At the same time there is this realization and appreciation that the growth and strength of an industry is defined by the regional attributes, not a singular location or company."

Cook County President Toni Preckwinkle is working with others across the Chicago area to promote growth and innovation close to home. While no funds have yet been disbursed, the outlook is bright. Consortium member UI

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Labs, a Chicago-based research and commercialization collaborative, recently won a U.S. Department of Defense's Digital Manufacturing & Design Innovation Grant.



"We believe that future funding that might result from the IMCP designation will greatly enhance the ability of firms and institutions to benefit from and participate in the work that will be done at UI Labs to the benefit of all those working in the Metal Cluster regionally," Jasso says.

The consortium is looking both to community colleges and high schools to re-establish manufacturing-related curricula. Other influences, such as the Maker's Movement—through which individuals join as a community to encourage each other to build and create—are gaining momentum, says Jasso. "These independent movements ... are showing that it's 'cool' to make things once again and that such activity can absolutely translate into economic value."

SOURCES

Cook County Government
Chicago
phone: 312/443-5500
www.cookcountyl.gov

UI Labs
Chicago
www.uilabs.org

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