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Workforce development can attract new industries to state

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Despite low taxes and favorable business environment, Nevada loses or does not attract many companies because much of the workforce lacks needed skills, said Rob Hooper, executive director of the Northern Nevada Development Authority.

The NNDA held a meeting Wednesday with educators, business leaders and state representatives to establish a committee whose goal is to attract high-paying jobs by improving the state's workers, starting with kindergarten students.

The committee is part of an ongoing NNDA effort bringing together experts to attract new industries to the region. The committee will meet throughout the year, along with panels focused on areas such as commercial real estate and manufacturing.

Hooper said Nevada's workforce is the No. 1 reason why many companies decide not to come to the Silver State.

"Communities that understand this fact, perform a marriage between economic development and workforce development ... will prosper and those that don't are going to crater," he said. "So the question for us is do we want to prosper or do we want to crater?"

Elliott Parker, an economist at the University of Nevada, Reno, said the state, historically, has not invested itself in education.

"There are many people that think low taxes will attract them, but many businesses will list low tax rates at No. 5 or No. 6 on the list," Parker said. "We do have some very smart and well educated people in Nevada, we just don't have enough of them."

Carol Lange, the dean of instruction at Western Nevada College and a member of the NNDA board, said the committee will bring together experts who otherwise would not have communicated. The goal now, she said, is results.

"We have to quit talking about it and we have to take some action," said Lange, who also is hosting meetings at WNC with David Steiger of Nevada Industry Excellence and local manufacturers about establishing formal relationships with students and potential employers in the area.

Carson City Assemblywoman Bonnie Parnell, a Democrat who chairs the Assembly's Education Committee, attended the meeting on Wednesday, saying it will give the region a chance to quash the reputation that it has a lackluster workforce.

"We have to fight that tired old rhetoric and this is a great start to show what we do have and what we can create," Parnell said.

Parker said Northern Nevada's challenge is the gradual decline of its service economy over the last 20 years given eroding gaming and tourism-related revenues.

Meanwhile, 18.2 percent of Nevadans 25 or older and hold a bachelors degree or higher, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. Nationwide it's 24.4 percent.

As a result, the NNDA says the state needs new industries to fill that vacuum by bringing higher paying jobs and much needed tax dollars. The only problem is those businesses say it's hard to fill jobs given the relatively low number of skilled workers and college graduates in the state.

"We need a cultural change," Parker said. "We need a change in which our state and its citizens value education."

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