

**BUSINESS**

# Governor touts labor innovation, reinvention in Lowell visit

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Gov. Deval Patrick, right, joins Steve Sawin, CEO of Operon Resource Management, in a round-table discussion on worker retraining at the Lowell company on Tuesday. Patrick's visit followed a stop at the Merrimack Valley Sandbox, where he announced a \$150,000 grant to support the nonprofit's mentoring programs. SUN / BOB WHITAKER

LOWELL -- Coming off a quarter in which the state grew a robust 5.5 percent, and a year in which it added 54,000 jobs, Gov. Deval Patrick was in Lowell pushing for more on Tuesday.

The governor visited two separate quadrants of the Wannalancit Mills during the afternoon, first to formally announce the awarding of three \$150,000 grants and later to participate in a roundtable discussion about job training and workforce development.

"Innovation is on fire in the commonwealth," Patrick gushed to about 40 entrepreneurs, their mentors and others during his first stop, at the nonprofit Merrimack Valley Sandbox on Cabot Street. "We continually find fresh ways to do things, to add jobs."

Patrick said Massachusetts has been particularly adept at advanced manufacturing, or the use of technology to improve products and or processes so as to increase competitiveness on the manufacturing floor.

"We are growing these jobs 50 percent faster than the nation (is)," Patrick said.

At the Sandbox, Patrick joined Pamela Goldberg, CEO of the Massachusetts Technology Collaborative, to meet with entrepreneurs and their mentors, hearing about business plans ranging from a mail-order fashion company to a nonprofit that diverts cases from juvenile court to private resolutions.

"This type of innovation is what our state is known for, but it has been done in one area of concentration," Patrick said. "It's time to spread that attitude outside Greater Boston."

The Sandbox earned one of three \$150,000 state grants to further its mentorship programs.

David Parker, executive director of the Sandbox, said the funds would go toward the hiring of two additional directors.

"One of those have a concentration in Spanish," Parker said, noting that it's the first language for several Sandbox participants. "It's tough enough to give a pitch in your first language. Imagine trying to do it using your second."

The other two grant recipients were Interise, a Boston-based nonprofit that aims to stimulate economic revitalization in lower-income communities; and Valley Venture Mentors, a Springfield organization that, like the Sandbox, connects early-stage ventures with experienced business mentors.

Later, Patrick participated in a roundtable discussion about pitching the concept of advanced manufacturing, and how to encourage displaced workers in other fields to invest in the necessary education so that these jobs can be filled.

The latter event took place at Operon Resource Management, at 660 Suffolk St., which offers health-care production-staffing services. Accompanying the governor there was his new Labor secretary, Rachel Kaprielian.

While that event was closed to reporters, Patrick said discussion centered around retraining and encouraging displaced workers to keep up with increasing demand for advanced-manufacturing personnel.

"These are jobs that require more than a high-school diploma," Patrick said, adding the state must add to partnerships such as that between Mount Wachusett Community College and Bristol-Myers Squibb in Devens. "We need to close that skills gap, particularly in the health-care manufacturing industry."

One successful career transitioner who participated in Tuesday's seminar is Jake Adams, who was laid off from a banking position, then used the services of Operon to get a new career at SMC Ltd., a Sterling-based contract manufacturer for health-care products.

"The governor asked me if I came (to my new job) with initiative," Adams, who holds a college degree and was recently promoted to manager, said afterward. "I said I did. It's about the people. They treat me real well.

"I had initiative, but you can teach that. I really believe that."

Operon had some news of its own: The company was recently awarded ISO 13485 certification, a key standard for its worker-training program.

"More than anything else, it gives our customers trust and confidence in our program," said Operon CEO Steve Sawin.

Among the Sawin clients participating in the roundtable discussion were Mount Wachusett Community College, SMC, Johnson & Johnson, Nypro Inc., Sterling Manufacturing, Micron Products, Atrium Medical Corp. and NP Medical Inc.

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