

HIGH-PAYING JOBS

Local schools and the business community are emphasizing STEM programs

Friday's announcement by Gov. Chris Gregoire that SEH America will expand its production capability in Vancouver dovetails smoothly

with a recent education emphasis. School districts and education agencies are ramping up local STEM programs. STEM focuses on science, technology, engineering and math. Its potential for creating high-tech jobs and supercharging Clark County's exit from the economic crisis is amazing.

Full details of SEH America's expansion here were not known Friday afternoon, but Gregoire said the announcement is "wonderful news for Vancouver, and the entire state of Washington. This important investment in manufacturing technology will allow Washington state to retain its leadership in semi-conductor manufacturing and is a vote of confidence in our skilled labor force and positive business climate."

That skilled labor force will be grow rapidly in the next few years, as Columbian reporter Tom Vogt explained in recent stories. Last month, Washington State University Vancouver opened its Engineering and Computer Science Building. Clark College has plans for a \$36 million building for science and similar classes.

Furthermore — and with a broader benefit to the community — leaders at both institutions of higher education are coordinating the local STEM growth, helping the figurative silos coalesce and "creating vital links with private-sector companies. These local businesses are eager to provide mentors, instructional assistance and intern programs.

The education/business partnership is crucial to both factions. High-tech manufacturers that are considering relocating here take a keen interest in the availability of properly trained workers. High-paying jobs — which other communities could secure if we don't remain competitive here — deliver positive impacts on the local housing market and retail sales.

At the K-12 level, local educators are doing their part, as well. Evergreen Public Schools is building a \$16 million health and bioscience high school near PeaceHealth Southwest Medical Center.

In the Vancouver school district, a new STEM magnet school has been approved. Classes will begin in 2012 at the middle school level and in the ninth and 10th grades. Ultimately, Vancouver Public Schools officials will decide on a site for the new campus, and in 2014 the STEM high school will have its first class of seniors.

Much of the credit for these local advancements goes to Anne Kennedy, director of STEM education at ESD 112. STEM planners and organizers also are accomplishing big things in local districts, and the Clark County High Tech and Community Council is building partnerships with the private sector.

The High Tech Council's chairman, Rob Bernardi, is president and chief operating officer of Kokusai Semiconductor. "Kokusai spends nine months, minimum, training new hires before they're productive," Bernardi said. "It's probably the same with other companies. (The council is) very proactive. One of our initiatives is education. We just had a quarterly high-tech council meeting with an update from SEH America on their work with the Vancouver school district. It was very impressive."

What's also impressive about STEM growth locally is the enthusiasm and aggressive approach in both the education and business communities. Leaders in those sectors are not waiting for the economic recovery to kick in; they're making bold moves now, as many moves as limited financial resources allow.

All of which proves a point we've made throughout this economic downturn. Success must be anticipated. Now is no time to wait. Now is the time for schools and businesses to position themselves for full speed once the hoped-for boom times return.