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Local frontier: Aerospace industry looks to expand into Oakland

BY JOSEPH SZCZESNY
Of the Oakland Press

The new Michigan Aerospace Manufacturers Association is looking for new opportunities for the state's small and medium-size manufacturing companies.

The association launched this year and is described by organizers as a strategic initiative to serve as a bridge between Michigan's manufacturing expertise and the growing demand for parts in the aerospace industry worldwide.

Gavin Brown, co-founder and MAMA president, said manufacturing has long been a pillar of the state's economy.

The companies that have joined MAMA come from across the state, Brown said. "Michigan's manufacturing base possesses many of the most sophisticated and technologically advanced facilities in the nation and one of the deepest and most talented work forces in the world," Brown said.

"These significant assets, coupled with a substantial manufacturing capacity, position Michigan effectively as the 'go-to' resource to meet this growing demand and address the significant manufacturing challenges facing this industry."

Craig Wolff, MAMA's other co-founder, said since it was organized last winter, the association has already signed up 17 members, including at least two in Oakland County. More companies have inquired about joining, he said.

Aerospace manufacturers don't have enough capacity to meet the demand for key components.

Component shortages are one of the reasons major companies such as Boeing Co. and Airbus have been forced to delay key programs, Wolff said.

Military contractors and makers of corporate-type aircraft also need reliable subcontractors and are facing shortages.

"We have exactly the opposite problem in Michigan," Wolff said. "We have too much capacity."

The association's goal is to match up some of Michigan's excess capacity with the aerospace demand.

Several of the MAMA members had tried to break into the aerospace business but had a difficult time getting the material needed to prepare a quote for submission to a contractor or key subcontractor, Wolff noted.

Kevin Webb, vice president of sales and marketing at Hy-

droDynamics Technologies Inc. in Pontiac, a longtime automotive supplier specializing in bending metal with water pressure, said joining MAMA fits into the company's long-term strategy.

"We were looking to diversify, and we're looking specifically at the aerospace industry," Webb said. "We are thrilled with the opportunity to leverage our equipment and production capabilities to manufacture parts for aerospace and military applications.

"But it's a very tough market to break into," he said. "This was a good opportunity for us to break into the business."

Joining the association, "turned out to be a good opportunity for us. Breaking into the aerospace business has been difficult for a lot of companies. Up until now, it's been something of a closed club," he said. "MAMA, however, has been able to open it up," Wolff said. "We know we're going to see some business coming our way pretty soon. We think we can make their lives easier. We have a lot of different businesses in our group."

Brown added MAMA is gaining traction. It provides a single-point of contact for aerospace companies and suppliers, and offers a conduit

for generating, reviewing and submitting RFQs, he said.

Wolff also said the members of MAMA have excellent record for quality, know how to work quickly under tight deadlines and have modern plants.

"They have great facilities, but they have been fighting a losing battle for automotive business," he said. "By and large, the parts built in Michigan also have better quality.

"In the aerospace industry today, the defect rate runs about 1,000 parts per million. The standards in auto industry, however, (allow) you to produce only one bad part per million units, roughly the same standard demanded in the pharmaceutical industry."

"In addition, automotive suppliers generally are larger and can work faster," he said.

"Suppliers in the aerospace industry have plants 30,000 to 40,000 square feet, while MAMA's members have plants of 150,000 and 200,000 square feet and the infrastructure to support them."

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