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A Business Perspective
By Steven Luetkehans

It is hard to find good economic information coming out of the daily news sources. Bail outs, cut backs and layoffs dominate the day's discussion to the point where you wonder if it will ever end.

I'm not an economist, but it is safe to say that our local and national economy will recover. While the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) is designed to jumpstart growth and transform our economy, time will tell if it works-but I guess if you have been hired already for a job that came from ARRA funding, it is working for you.

According to the ARRA, it is intended to create or save 3.5 million jobs over the next two years. Initiatives that will likely have the most immediate job impacts are in the fields of construction for renewable energy and energy efficiency buildings, electric transmission and the rebuilding and building of transportation and waterway systems.

The ARRA is also designed to provide unprecedented increased funding through the Workforce Investment Act for grants for postsecondary education and training in what the government calls "high growth, middle skill occupations."

According to the Department of Labor, nearly half of all job openings in the next 10 years will be middle skill occupations, which are defined as those that require some training or education beyond high school, but less than a four-year degree.

Middle Skill Occupations in the fields of construction, manufacturing, health care, transportation, public safety and customer service—many of these are well-paying jobs—are projected to grow and currently make up some of the largest segment of the U.S. labor market.

A high school education is no longer adequate and for those that cannot afford or desire it, a four-year education may not be necessary for a chance at economic security and earnings prosperity.

President Obama suggests that every American commit to at least one or more years of higher education or training. Along that line, the DuPage Workforce Board recently has endorsed a national initiative called Skills 2 Compete, whose vision is that every U.S. worker has access to at least two years of education or training past high school-leading to a vocational credential, industry, and apprenticeship certification that can be acquired at community or technical colleges.

I had the opportunity a couple weeks ago to attend the dedication of the College of DuPage's Technical Education Center. The facility will provide a great learning shelter for today's and tomorrow's worker. There are many great facilities like the College of DuPage; locally, we also have DeVry and Illinois Institute of Technology, to name a couple.

These institutions are vital to the nation's economic future that they train our workforce with the necessary skill to not only help fill Middle Skill Occupations, but taking it one necessary step further; help us compete across the world in innovation and quality manufacturing.

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