

Civic partnership looking to slow the 'brain drain'

Scholarships target available area jobs

By **JIM DINO**

jimdino@standardspeaker.com

The Greater Hazleton Area Civic Partnership is looking for people who want to try to keep youth in the area.

One need identified by the Partnership shortly after it was created was that youth leave the area after college – some refer to it as the “brain drain.”

Recognizing the need to try to keep young, educated people here, the Partnership three years ago began a scholarship program for students who were enrolled in a curriculum in which jobs are available locally.

There are job opportunities here that pay in the \$50,000 a year range – if you have the right education.

In order to fund the program, Partnership members have canvassed local business and industry. The aim of the committee is to make the fund endow itself – in other words, have enough money that it can be invested, and be self-sustaining – as well as offering more than one scholarship per year.

Jack St. Pierre, chairman of the committee, said the group once numbered 20 members. But its membership has dwindled recently, and new committee members are being sought – so that more funds can be obtained to keep the program going.

The program is over three years old, but still suffers from three problems – a lot of students don't know it exists, and some that do, believe there are not job opportunities in this area. The committee has also had problems funding the program.

But St. Pierre said local high school students think the presence of manufacturing plants in this area means there are only manufacturing jobs on the local job market.

But there are also technical opportunities in this area that can earn someone a handsome living, St. Pierre said.

“We are trying to dispel the long-standing theory that has been in place over the past several years,” St. Pierre said. “Many young people have no idea what is going on in manufacturing plants. Many plants have technical require-

ments that require an education to maintain. When you say maintenance, they think of someone pushing a broom. But it's not that at all. Someone is needed to help maintain this highly sophisticated equipment. Some jobs start at \$15 an hour. You can make \$60,000 to \$80,000 a year.”

But the more pressing need at this time is getting students to know about it, so they can apply for it. The committee intends to award its third scholarship in June.

The program is being offered to provide funds for students who “demonstrate a sincere desire to return to the greater Hazleton area to begin their employment careers,” and asks the applicant to sign a contract that the applicant will remain in the Hazleton area for three years after graduation.

St. Pierre said the purpose of the program is important, not only to employers looking for workers with specific skills, but also to keeping the area's young people in the area after completing their education.

Those eligible for a scholarship must be pursuing a degree or certification in a two- or four-year accredited program of study. The committee wants to assist students who are pursuing an education in a field in which there are job opportunities available in the Hazleton area.

Some of the typical two-year programs include industrial maintenance technician, manufacturing technology, electronics technology, computer technology and industrial technology.

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Typical four-year programs include computer engineering, manufacturing engineering and production technology.

Some potential careers available in the Hazleton area include the following two-year programs: industrial maintenance technician, manufacturing technology, electronics technology, computer technology and industrial technology. Some typical four-year programs for which there are local job opportunities include computer engineering, manufacturing engineering and production technology.

Typical job functions in these fields would include service, troubleshooting, and repair or sophisticated manufacturing machinery and systems. Installing of manufacturing systems, many of which are computer-operated, and overall preventative maintenance. Candidates with strong hands-on mechanical aptitude, and good analytical and problem-solving skills would be ideally suited for these careers.

Candidates must reside within the boundaries of the Hazleton Area School District or Weatherly Area School District, must achieve a minimum 2.75 grade-point average, must demonstrate employability and the desire to satisfy local employer needs.

Candidates must also demonstrate a sincere desire to return to the Hazleton area to begin their employment careers.

They must sign a contract with the Partnership to remain in the area for three years after graduation.

The program offers scholarships of \$3,000 per year, renewable for two years, to any student taking a course in a field where there are jobs available in this area.

The scholarship winner and applicants may also be eligible for scholarships through the Pennsylvania Higher Education Assistance Agency, the New Technology Scholarship Program, the GI Bill for New Economy, and SciTech Scholars program.

For further information, contact the Partnership at 455-1508 or a high school guidance counselor.

Earning potential in the Hazleton area for these degrees ranges between \$25,000 and \$70,000 a year, depending upon knowledge and experience level. St. Pierre said jobs available in those fields are paying up to \$15 per hour.

The scholarship, or scholarships, is awarded each June. Those interested in applying can contact the Partnership's executive director, Bob Skulsky, at the Greater Hazleton Chamber of Commerce office at 455-1508, or on the Internet at www.hazletonchamber.org.

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