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Forum: High-tech firms will aid state

Input given for economy boost

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WAUSAU The limping Wisconsin economy has lost low-skill manufacturing jobs to China and Mexico and fallen behind neighbors Illinois and Minnesota.

Only one route will lead to recovery the high road, toward skilled labor and high-technology companies, a group of economists and businessmen agreed at a forum here Tuesday.

"There is no low-road strategy. The low-skill economy is not going to be in Wisconsin," said John Torinus, president and chief executive officer of Serigraph, a West Bend printing company that has sent work to Mexico.

The forum was the first in a 15-month series called "Building the New Wisconsin Economy" that will explore ways to improve the state's economy. It's being sponsored by 11 state news outlets, including the Leader-Telegram, as well as several education and business groups. About 185 journalists, business leaders and others attended.

The problems are clear: The state has lost 54,000 manufacturing jobs in the last three years. Its per capita income is below the national average, and it lags behind Minnesota by \$5,000.

"We had a lot of big, powerful companies

that carried the economy for a couple of generations," Torinus said, companies like Allis-Chalmers and Schlitz.

Now the state needs to develop the next generation of companies, ones that will thrive in the new, high-technology economy, he said.

Colleges and technical colleges must work together to prepare people to work in the new high-technology disciplines, educators said.

"Expansions happen where there are educated people at all levels," said Rolf Wegenke, president of the Wisconsin Association of Independent Colleges and Universities.

The new economy is so fast-changing that workers will have to constantly upgrade their training, Wegenke said. Educational institutions will have to work closely with employers.

In addition, the state needs better access to venture capital to fund high-risk new companies, participants agreed. Already, the state has created a venture capital fund, and now Gov. Jim Doyle has proposed creating another \$300 million pool of seed money.

Beyond that, Wisconsin must nurture an entrepreneurial culture, which it has lacked in recent years, several participants said.

One effort is the Wisconsin Alumni Research Foundation, which transfers technology from UW-Madison to commercial use, Torinus said.

Beyond that, the state must move beyond its culture of envy, in which people resent others who have been successful, said Todd Berry, president of

the Wisconsin Taxpayers Alliance.

"You can't create an entrepreneurial culture we talked about if you're always talking about envy," Berry said.

Wisconsin has recognized that the best way to develop business is to grow its own, rather than trying to attract companies from elsewhere, Wegenke said.

"There's now a recognition that the real growth is in home-grown companies," Wegenke said.

The state also should encourage the development of "clusters" companies in the same industry that tend to develop in the same geographic area, he said.