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Wisconsin's Economic Growth Brings New Challenges, New Opportunities

Wisconsin's unemployment rate is currently 2.9%, tied for its lowest rate on record. New data from the state's Department of Workforce Development showed that Sheboygan County's unemployment rate is 2.6%. This is the 2nd lowest March on record for Sheboygan County.

Record low unemployment is just one of many indicators our local and state economies are on the right track. Over the last three years, more than 4,000 people in Sheboygan County have gained employment. The first bill signed into law last year was legislation authored by Rep. Terry Katsma (R-Oostburg) and I to remove a state barrier to building a new cheese plant in Sheboygan County. Masters Gallery broke ground last year and [the facility is expected to open at the end of this month](#).

This economic growth is not exclusive to Sheboygan County. Both Calumet and Manitowoc Counties set record lows for unemployment rates in March. Both counties also increased their total employment over the last three years.

However, low unemployment rates create new challenges. I increasingly hear from employers about their struggles in finding qualified workers. Employers routinely consider available workers when deciding where to locate and expand.

In my spring survey, I asked constituents how the state should tackle the workforce shortage. Nearly 700 constituents responded and the top selection was to "Partner high schools with growing businesses."

The good news is some of these collaborations are already occurring. In an effort to connect students with trade skills, the Red Raider Manufacturing program partners the Sheboygan Area School District and Lakeshore Technical College together with area manufacturers. Youth Apprenticeship Programs in Sheboygan, Manitowoc, and Calumet Counties offer high school juniors and seniors on the job training. Last year, the Manitowoc program alone partnered with 72 area employers.

The Youth Apprenticeship Program is part of a statewide School-to-Work initiative that offers high school students interactive learning in an occupation along with classroom teaching. The last state budget invested nearly \$40 million in workforce training grants. Earlier this month Plymouth High

School received a new fabrication lab grant to help them purchase a new computer-controlled cutting machine. Fabrication labs help students gain hands-on experience in areas like design and engineering.

However, we need to do more to ensure Wisconsin's economy continues to grow. Next session, I look forward to continuing to help partner local employers with educators on creative ways to further strengthen Wisconsin's workforce.

Senator Devin LeMahieu (R-Oostburg) represents the 9th Senate District, which includes portions of Sheboygan, Manitowoc, and Calumet Counties.

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