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Staff photo by MARK M. MURRAY

Jason Coffin works on a part at Boulevard Machine & Gear Company at 785 Page Blvd. in Springfield where components of Boeing's 747 Dreamliner are made.

Specialty firms see opportunities

By JIM KINNEY
Business writer

SPRINGFIELD - Boeing's 747 Dreamliner has landed on factory floors in Western Massachusetts.

"It is really just getting started," explained Susan M. Kasa, president of Boulevard Machine & Gear. "Orders for the planes are coming in. Orders for the parts are coming in."

Kasa's company, a precision manufacturer, makes

tiny parts that make up larger components all over the new \$193-million Dreamliners as well as in other aircraft and space equipment. The company has 22 employees now and is looking to add to its work force if Kasa can find the skilled machinists and technicians her company requires.

"We really have just seen a rebound," Kasa said. "I can see nothing but good things."

The old days of sprawling

American Bosch or Westinghouse plants employing thousands of workers may be over in the Pioneer Valley. But precision manufacturing, mostly done by small operations like Boulevard Machine & Gear, which make highly specialized parts as subcontractors, still employs 7,800 workers in the region.

Nationally, manufacturing had a good year in 2011, according to statistics released in December by the

Federal Reserve. Factory output rose by 0.9 percent from November to December, marking the biggest gain since December 2010. Over the year, manufacturing was up 3.7 percent and up 15 percent from its lows from three years ago.

The Federal Reserve pointed to Americans buying more cars and companies buying more equipment and comput-

Please see Factory, Page A14

Factory: Specialty firms project positive outlook

Continued from Page A1

ers in addressing the gains. Businesses also restocked their inventories following years of razor-thin stockpiles.

James H. Cepican, general manager for tooling and accessories for Citizen Machinery America Inc. in Agawam, says manufacturers have been outfitting shop floors with the latest in technology. "I think it is going to be fairly consistent, comparable to next year," Cepican said.

The making of medical devices, which can include artificial hips, bone screws and stents, is strong in this region. Elsewhere around the country, companies are gearing up to make parts for wind turbines and solar panels.

"Plant owners are doing more things with more equipment but less people," Cepican said.

But, all was not rosy. According to the state Executive Office of Labor and Workforce Development, Greater Springfield lost 1,000 manufacturing jobs last month. There were 2,100 jobs lost in manufacturing in Greater Springfield in all of 2011. It was the only sector of the economy to post a year-over-year job loss.

The drop was blamed on a few larger manufacturers deciding to layoff workers or extend a seasonal layoff longer than usual, according to the state.

Locally, many manufacturers reported a successful 2011, and they are optimistic for 2012.

Iconic gunmaker Smith & Wesson was down to just 600 employees in Springfield back in 2001. Now it has 1,200 em-



Staff photo by MARK M. MURRAY

Susan M. Kasa, president of Boulevard Machine & Gear in Springfield, says the company is looking to add to its workforce.

ployees at its Roosevelt Avenue facility after moving 225 Thompson Center employees there from a closed factory in New Hampshire. The company received a \$6 million state tax break over seven years and a \$600,000 city tax abatement over five years in return for moving the Thompson-Center jobs here.

Warren Pumps added 30 jobs after closing a factory in Maine, according to Thomas F. Spock, vice president of global defense. Much of Warren Pumps' work is for the Navy, so Spock can't discuss its work publicly. But, the company is seeing a growing demand for its work from the oil sector.

"When oil hits a certain price per barrel, they start drilling," Spock said. "We make the pumps that go on the oil rigs in the Gulf of Mexico. It's a growing sector for us."

It makes sense to manufac-

ture here in Western Massachusetts even though it's a high-cost state, according to Spock.

"We have such a highly-engineered product," he said.

"They sell for \$500,000 or more a piece. They have to be right. We need the expertise we can find here."

Peter J. Letendre, director of operations at Titeflex in Springfield, describes his company's 120 employees as a "rare resource." Titeflex added workers in 2011 after tearing down unused factory space on its Springfield property to make its operations more efficient.

Titeflex makes Teflon hoses shielded with braided material, most commonly stainless steel. "Our automotive customers have been steady," Letendre said. "Our aircraft business had been very hot, both to Boeing and Airbus.

Titeflex is also gaining customers frustrated with parts made in China. The cost of making things in China is rising, and long lead times make it difficult to fix problems, according to Letendre. His company has started using a machine shop in Chicopee to

make parts for exactly that reason.

Still, inflation costs are making it difficult to buy raw materials, especially for Teflon. The Chinese government controls the supply of a mineral used in the process, he said.

Chicopee's John R. Lyman Co. and its high-tech subsidiary Lymtech Scientific moved into a new 80,000-square-foot, \$3 million factory at 225 Westover Road in March.

Business is good, according to Lyman's president, William S. Wright. Lymtech makes specialized, alcohol-infused wipes used in the manufacture of medical devices and electronics. They once made a lot of wipes for makers of electronics.

"The electronics business has totally gone offshore," Wright said. "You just keep looking for new markets."

The company has a total of about 100 employees, 18 at the old facility in Chicopee's Cabotville Industrial Park where

Lyman makes old-fashioned rags for companies including piano makers Steinway & Sons in New York City.

Wright said he's not looking to hire more people, though. "We're doing it with overtime," Wright said. "Everybody is a little afraid to hire right now. We don't know what is going on with federal health care. What new requirements will there be? It's got everybody a little scared."

Jim Kinney can be reached at jkinney@repub.com