

Business titans back engineering plan

By [Tim Carpenter](#)

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Cessna in Wichita can't build aircraft without top-flight engineers.

In Overland Park, Black & Veatch won't develop power plants or water treatment facilities without a steady flow of engineers.

Garmin in Olathe isn't going to locate cutting-edge GPS technology without savvy engineers.

That is why a shortage of Kansas engineering school graduates inspired Senate leaders, business executives and university administrators to join forces Thursday for unveiling of a proposal to create a new state-industry partnership expanding by 60 percent engineers produced by Kansas State University, Wichita State University and The University of Kansas.

"It's bedrock," said Jack Pelton, chief executive officer of Cessna. "Everything we do is based on new designs and concepts."

Jim Lewis, chief administrative officer at Black & Veatch, said the company had grown in the past 35 years from 800 employees to 8,000 workers worldwide. The firm's future is directly tied to skills possessed by engineers working under the Black & Veatch label.

"Our growth is dependent on being able to hire good engineers," he said.

Both spoke at a news conference in the Senate chamber attended by executives of engineering-rich companies, Senate members, university officials and engineering students.

Under the proposal, \$1 million would be set aside in fiscal year 2012, which begins in July, for KSU, WSU and KU programs designed to attract and retain more engineering students. The funding might be used for academic support services, equipment or laboratories.

The account supervised by the Kansas Board of Regents would be expanded to \$4 million in fiscal year 2013 and to \$7 million in fiscal year 2014.

For every \$1 drawn from the fund in support of engineering education, the university would have to secure \$2 from private sources for the cause.

Kirk Schulz, president of Kansas State in Manhattan, said investment by the state would help convince donors to make a commitment to engineering education in Kansas.

The pitch, he said: "Look, the state is giving us a resource. We need your help to make this happen."

Senate President Steve Morris, R-Hugoton, and Sen. Carolyn McGinn, the Sedgwick Republican who chairs the Senate budget committee, plan to take lead roles in moving the legislation through the Senate.

Morris initially raised questions about an engineering shortage two years ago. He remains convinced the state's economic future — highlighted by the new \$35 billion Boeing tanker contract and emerging bioscience and wind energy sectors — will be tied to work of engineers.

"We are asking our legislative colleagues and the governor to join us in advancing this multi-year initiative," Morris said. "Every year we delay, we put our state's economic future at risk."

At least one Democrat, House Minority Leader Paul Davis, wasn't shy about patting the Senate Republicans on the back. He said the engineering proposal reflected the desire of voters to advance bills tied to rebuilding the state's fractured economy.

"There are Republicans in the building who understand what we need to be doing," said Davis, of Lawrence.

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A plan to engineer Kansas' future

By [Tim Carpenter](#)

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Program would increase state's engineer grads by 60 percent

THE CAPITAL-JOURNAL

Senate leaders, public university officials and prominent business executives are prepared to unveil a new initiative for strengthening the Kansas economy by investing in engineering education, The Topeka Capital-Journal learned Wednesday.

The program would support a long-term campaign to increase by 60 percent the number of engineering graduates emerging from The University of Kansas, Wichita State University and Kansas State University.

Enlarging the state's pool of engineering talent takes on new meaning in wake of the federal government's decision to award a contract to Boeing for construction of a new generation of air refueling tankers.

KU chancellor Bernadette Gray-Little said the university was working with public and private partners to recruit more students and faculty to produce the critical mass of talent to help the state prosper.

"Despite our gains," she said, "a shortage of engineers remains, and this is an impediment to growth in Kansas."

Gray-Little told members of the Senate Ways and Means Committee that engineering-intensive industries represented one-third of the state's tax base and accounted for two-thirds of the state's exports.

"Engineering jobs create prosperity, which is why business leaders have called for a 60 percent increase in the number of engineers we train," she said.

Financing of the program would begin with a \$1 million appropriation previously recommended by Gov. Sam Brownback for engineering education.

The special account would continue to grow during the next 15 years with a combination of state aid and private matching dollars.

The coalition's ultimate monetary target for the engineering education fund wasn't clear.

Participating universities would be required to contribute \$2 for every \$1 drawn from the account held by the Kansas Board of Regents.

Under the group's proposal, which is scheduled to be unveiled today at the Capitol, the state would earmark revenue from expanding casino operations to fuel investment in engineering.

A state-owned casino is operating in Dodge City and work is proceeding on gambling facilities south of Wichita and in the Kansas City area.

In 2009, House and Senate leaders began raising questions about implications of a shortage of engineering graduates.

A bipartisan task force explored the issue, but nothing concrete emerged from the work.

"Kansas must look to the future and prepare our youth for challenging and vital opportunities in engineering careers," Senate President Stephen Morris, R-Hugoton, said at that time. "We cannot afford to ignore the clear and compelling data which indicate the demand for engineering graduates outpaces current supply."

House Speaker Mike O'Neal, R-Hutchinson, said rising demand for engineers in aerospace manufacturing, commercial construction and other sectors of the economy should grab attention of lawmakers.

"Soaring demand for engineering work in areas such as energy, water, health care and aviation will play a key role in our state's future economic prosperity and innovation," he said.

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