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A \$37M booster shot in works

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The Rochester/Finger Lakes area is getting a \$37 million infusion to help bolster its economy.

The nine-county area was one of 13 regions chosen from among 97 proposals nationwide to be awarded \$15 million each in federal money, paid over three years.

It's part of a \$195 million investment through a program unveiled Tuesday in President Bush's State of the Union address. It's being called WIRED, or Workforce Innovation in Regional Economic Development. In a conference call Wednesday, U.S. Secretary of Labor Elaine L. Chao called the program "one of the largest grant packages in the department's history."

Added to the federal money will be \$22 million that will be raised by 21 local partners - including governments, community colleges, universities and business and work force investment groups - who will be part of the WIRED initiative.

The money will flow through RochesterWorks, designated the local lead on the project. Officials have not finalized specifics, such as which projects will be funded, said Matthew Hurlbutt, RochesterWorks' executive director. A governing board drawn from the 21 partners will oversee the project.

The goal? Help Rochester in its shift away from dependence on manufacturing - which has been in decline - and toward emerging sectors that will require a work force with different skills, Chao said.

The money will be used to attract companies and train workers in entrepreneurship, optics and imaging, biotechnology and life sciences, and alternative energy, Chao said.

In-demand jobs range from optics technicians to engineers in the life sciences field, Hurlbutt said.

"But a lot of the jobs we need we don't even know about yet, like those in alternative energy," he added. He said the money provided through the program will allow the region to adapt training classes as needed.

In November, state governments nominated up to three regions with "transitional" economies - either statewide or across state boundaries - that struggled with problems such as natural disasters, outsourcing or an over-reliance on struggling industries. The Rochester area was the only region picked in New York state.

Chao said the winning entries "had the best combination of public and private partnerships" to help implement the job-growth initiatives.

"This initiative will enable us to strengthen regional collaboration and build on the entrepreneurial spirit that has long been a hallmark of our community," said a statement from Monroe County Executive Maggie Brooks, whose government is part of the initiative.

WIRED will help the area build upon its assets: its educated work force and "advanced industries that are poised to grow," said James Winston, executive assistant to the president for work force development at Monroe Community College, which is a local partner.

He noted one project in the proposal: community colleges partnering with schools, such as Edison Technical and Occupational Education Center, to create labs where students would learn new, advanced technology during the day and adults would train at night. Other initiatives could range from better commercialization of research from local universities to helping entrepreneurs embrace new technologies, Hurlbutt said.

"This is just the sort of boost that's needed to stimulate the transformation of Rochester's work force for the high-tech, ideas-based economy of the future," University of Rochester President Joel Seligman said in a statement. UR is among the 21 local partners.

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What's at stake

Regional job growth. The money will go to develop programs that will create or attract jobs, as well as to train area workers for emerging fields such as biotechnology, optics and alternative fuels.

Other recipients

Rochester is one of 13 regions nationally picked to share \$195 million for economic development. The other regions: coastal Maine, including Bangor; northeast Pennsylvania, including Allentown; 12 North Carolina counties, including Greensboro; central Michigan, including Flint; western Michigan, including Grand Rapids; Florida panhandle, including Tallahassee and Pensacola; western Alabama and eastern Mississippi; central Indiana, including Lafayette; greater Kansas City; greater Denver; central and eastern Montana; and coastal California, including Oakland, Los Angeles and San Diego.

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