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Wind may hold energy, jobs

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UNION TWP. - Steve Melink, on a mission to make his Melink Corp.'s building here a showpiece of energy efficiency, watches a US flag flutter in the wind outside and sees a missed opportunity.

"I want that wind to work for us," said Melink, who is installing the first low-speed Aventa wind turbine in North America.

Designed by a Swiss aerospace engineer, the 60-foot Aventa turbine has three oversized fan blades and can generate electricity with wind speeds as low as 4 mph versus the 8 to 10 mph required for most small-scale wind machines.

Melink went to Switzerland in November to visit the manufacturer and had the system shipped to his plant, which produces heating and ventilating equipment for restaurant chains and other retailers. He thinks Ohio could develop a niche as a manufacturer of light-wind turbines for small businesses.

"All the components, the blades, the generator, the power inverter, can be made right here," said Melink, whose company focuses on energy efficiency and whose headquarters in 2006 was the first gold-certified energy-efficient building in Ohio cited by the U.S. Green Building Council.

The administration of Gov. Ted Strickland sees wind and other renewable sources as not only a less-polluting means of diversifying the state's energy sources but also as a job-development tool.

Ohio ranked behind only California in new job potential from large-scale wind development, according to a 2004 study for the Department of Energy.

The study concluded that development of 50,000 megawatts of wind power nationally over a period of years could generate 11,688 jobs in Ohio, second only to California's 12,717.

Because utility-scale wind turbines are large and expensive to ship, turbine makers tend to locate manufacturing close to where they expect turbine demand to develop.

"Ohio has lagged behind over the last 20 years," said Kemp Jaycox, wind program manager for the nonprofit Green Energy Ohio. "But it's waking up to fact that wind is a tremendous economic development tool."

Although Southwest Ohio doesn't have the wind resources to support large-scale wind farms, experts think that the area's metal-cutting, forging and assembly expertise will benefit as wind power develops in the state.

Forest Park-based Magna Machine Co., which specializes in machining very large metal parts, has a multi-year agreement to machine 40,000-pound turbine rotor hubs and support bases for Clipper Windpower's plant in Cedar Rapids, Iowa.

Scott Kramer, president of the family-owned company, said Magna has added about 25 jobs, increasing employment to 125 in the past couple of years, because of its wind turbine work.

It now represents about 15 percent of Magna's sales, but Kramer said it could grow to 40 percent in the next few years. "This industry is just in its infancy in the United States," he said.

Magna is one of about half a dozen wind turbine component suppliers in Southwest Ohio that the state has identified, and it's looking for more.

Aug. 20, the Great Lakes Wind Network, an industry-state initiative to recruit and qualify suppliers for wind-equipment makers, will have the second of a series of statewide meetings at Miami University at Oxford for interested companies. The session will explain the wind industry's market potential and what manufacturers seek from suppliers.

For more information on the seminar, e-mail dholody@wire-net.org.

To spur his vision of Ohio becoming a sort of Silicon Valley for renewable energy manufacturing, Melink is planning an invitation-only energy meeting of business and government officials Sept. 19 at his plant off Roundbottom Road to discuss how to develop a cohesive strategy.