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Senate Leadership Offers Engineering Initiative

Kansas Senate Unveils Engineering Initiative Key to Kansas Job Growth and Economic Improvement

Topeka -- According to Kansas Senate leaders who today unveiled a multi-year program to address the state's engineering workforce shortage, Kansas must expand capacity at its three schools of engineering if Kansas employers are to meet current and future workforce needs.

"Convincing data shows the demand for engineering graduates remains high, and projections are very clear that this trend will continue," stated Senate President Steve Morris, R-Hugoton. "We are asking our legislative colleagues and the Governor to join us in advancing this multi-year initiative. Every year we delay, we put our state's economic future at risk. We know many of our leading manufacturing companies and engineering firms are already forced to look elsewhere for engineers to fill critical jobs because our schools cannot meet the demand."

"It is especially critical that we take action this year in light of the announcement that Boeing will build the next generation of air refueling tankers," noted Senate Ways and Means Chairperson Carolyn McGinn, R-Wichita. "But even beyond aviation, we have a wind energy industry growing statewide with manufacturing setting up in Newton and Hutchinson already along with a booming Bioscience Industry - as we are now ranked 5th in the Nation for Biotech Strength. As policymakers, it's our job to make sure we align state resources with critical needs -- such as engineering -- so we achieve results that make a real difference in our state's economic future."

Senator John Vratil added that in the Kansas City area, home to many of the world's premier private engineering firms, the economic impact of engineering is a well established. "The Kansas City area -- home to Black and Veatch, Burns & McDonnell, HNTB and many others --

has long been the envy of other cities. Unless we increase the number of engineering graduates, we won't be able to retain this strong corporate engineering presence in our region. Several years ago, the leaders of these firms warned Kansas that unless steps were taken in the next few years, the state would risk losing engineering firms and the great jobs and economic impact they provide. We simply can't afford to keep putting it off for another day. The time to act is now."

The initiative builds upon a \$1 million initial investment made in the Governor's budget recommendations for FY 2012. Following the initial investment, we would create a KAN-Grow Engineering Fund at the Kansas Board of Regents funded by automatic transfers from the state's Expanded Lottery Act Revenue Fund (ELARF) each year beginning in FY 2013.

The program would authorize the Regents to approve plans developed by the Schools of Engineering at KU, KSU and WSU to increase the number of engineering graduates by 60 percent. The plans would be developed in concert with private industry, in consultation with the Board of Regents, to ensure industry partners find the new talent, designs and techniques needed to fuel economic growth and business success. The program would require each university to put forward matching funds from private funds, foundation/endowment funds, grants or other non-SGF sources.

Greg Graves, CEO of Burns & McDonnell stated, "This Senate proposal is a wonderful step forward for the state of Kansas and the region. Burns & McDonnell's ability to deliver the design and planning services and construction expertise the world needs is dependent upon our ability to find top talent at all levels of the job market. This initiative by leadership in Kansas will set the stage for future success, not only for Burns & McDonnell, but for a number of Kansas's major employers."

"A major challenge the aircraft industry faces is a significant shortage of qualified engineers," added Jeff Turner, President and CEO of Spirit AeroSystems, Inc. in Wichita. "Engineering plays a key role in helping to drive Spirit's business success, as well as the continued economic growth of our communities."

"At the urging of Senate President Morris a few years ago, the Board began working on this initiative with our campuses and industry leaders and have made it a funding priority," said Regents Chairman Gary Sherrer. "We appreciate the Senate recognizing the significant economic return of engineering programs and the vital role higher education plays in boosting the Kansas economy."

Entry-level engineering jobs are high paying and have the potential to carry the state forward by increasing the size of the tax base. The economic impact from engineering professionals also provides a significant benefit to other segments of the Kansas workforce. A 2009 study by the Center for Economic Development and Business Research showed that for every one engineering professional, there are an additional 1.78 persons employed in Kansas, and state fiscal outlays associated with an increase in engineering graduates have a benefit-cost ratio of 2.07.