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Presidential visit highlights innovation in PG county

President Barack Obama visited the region earlier this month. While a presidential visit is a thrill for residents in the area – even if the president got Petersburg and Prince George mixed up a bit — the visit had much more meaning for our economy.

Obama gave a speech about the economy - and that's all fine and good. But the real significance of the visit is that the president came to the production-room floor of a disc-manufacturing facility at Rolls-Royce's Crosspointe campus to tout the project as a national model.

The president held up the aerospace giant's partnership with Virginia colleges and universities at the in-progress Commonwealth Center for Advanced Manufacturing as a model for his National Network of Manufacturing Innovation.

The work at the Rolls-Royce campus and its partnership with universities at the Commonwealth Center for Advanced Manufacturing or CCAM — a 60,000-square-foot research facility that is slated for completion in September — is being touted as a national model for advanced manufacturing in America. That is an extraordinary acknowledgment that the vision of Rolls-Royce officials, university leaders and the state's political leaders - both Republican and Democrat — is worth emulating.

"We are making a huge investment in education, and if there's one thing I have to stress, it's the importance of our education system in order for this nation to be competitive," said James Guyette, chairman, president and CEO of Rolls-Royce North America Inc.

Within the decade, the $12.9 million research and development center expects to expand to a full-time staff of 60, with 70 slots for graduate and undergraduate students. Rolls-Royce also expects to add 140 new high-tech manufacturing jobs with the addition of an advanced blade machining facility. Already, Rolls-Royce has already manufacturing facility opened last May and manufactures discs and associated parts. It cost $170 million and employs about 150 workers. The plant will manufacture about 2,000 parts per year, worth $50,000 to $100,000 per piece, company officials said at the grand opening. Already, Rolls-Royce has invested a bundle in the Prince George County campus. The first manufacturing facility opened last May and manufactures discs and associated parts. It cost $170 million and employs about 150 workers.

The president came to Prince George County to endorse the concept of private industry and higher education joining to build advanced manufacturing facilities across the United States. During the visit, President Obama announced plans to build a $1 billion network of advanced manufacturing think tanks across the country.

"You just got all this brain power and skill and experience coming together in this hub, and that makes the whole greater than the sum of its parts," Obama said. "It allows everybody to learn from each other and figure out how we're going to do things even better."

National Network of Manufacturing Innovation, which the White House says, will "build a network of up to fifteen Institutes for Manufacturing Innovation around the country, serving as regional hubs of manufacturing excellence that will help to make our manufacturers more competitive and encourage investment in the United States."

The president's budget proposes a $1 billion investment to create this new National Network for Manufacturing Innovation, but the funding prospects remain unclear in Congress.

But in Virginia, Gov. Bob McDonnell said he had not reviewed the president's proposal, but said that investing in young people and American manufacturing are concepts that both political parties support.

Perhaps the concept of joining together institutions of higher learning and private companies to create advance manufacturing is an economic strategy that both political parties in Congress will be willing to invest in.

AP PHOTO

President Barack Obama looks at a aircraft component with employee Robert Abernathy during his tour of the Rolls-Royce Crosspointe jet engine disc manufacturing facility on March, 9 in Prince George County. The facility is part of an advanced manufacturing complex that the president wants to use as a national model.