



SB 2019 Testimony

Specific to Discussions Regarding the Proposed Cass County Career Academy

Thomas D. Shorma – March 5th, 2021

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee, my name is Tom Shorma, and I am the CEO and President of WCCO Belting, Inc. We are a 66-yr old primary sector, family-owned, manufacturing company that today employs 300+ people at two locations. We manufacture custom rubber products and sell them annually to customers located in more than 20 countries.

I provide this written testimony for your consideration while representing many different private sector businesses in the Red River Valley who strongly support the creation of the Cass County Career Workforce Academy. This project is designed as a public / private partnership to assist with workforce challenges in crucial industries in ND. In fact, millions of dollars have already been pledged and paid by those private sector companies in support of its creation.

It should be noted that WCCO Belting, Inc., the business which I currently lead is in *Richland County*. Also, that I currently reside in Fargo which of course is in Cass County. Yes, I make the drive down from Fargo to our business in Wahpeton nearly every day. I do so while my children attend middle school and high school in Cass County.

WCCO Belting and the Shorma family support for the Career Workforce Academy is provided under unique circumstances of which I feel allows me to give a perspective that many others simply do not have. I say this because I speak from first-hand experience. Our various family-owned companies all located in Wahpeton have directly benefited by having a version of this same initiative in our community for the past 40+ years. Every year, NDSCS offers high school students' in Richland County exposure to and training for technical careers that are here in our state even before they graduate...just as is being proposed for Cass County. And ultimately, isn't that what this is all about -- helping the students better understand what kinds of careers exist here so that they can stay? Don't we all want to keep more of our own from leaving the state?

The proposed Career Academy for Cass County would offer programs for K-14 students, to the incumbent workforce and to new immigrants with a curriculum to prepare them for success. In the wake of the coronavirus pandemic and other current economic factors, retraining a workforce for careers in high demand sectors is increasingly important. It is also why we – as a family – have agreed to financially support the private / public partnership that has been established to create such a facility -- even though our business is not located in Cass County! This is because we know first-hand that it WORKS!

Since the business that I lead is a manufacturing company, please bear with me as I take just a minute to look at the need for a Career Training Academy in Cass County from another perspective. For many years we have all heard and have been talking about the national and regional shortage of a HIGH DEMAND / TECHNICALLY SKILLED workforce.

- What do you think of when you hear the term HIGH DEMAND / TECHNICALLY SKILLED workforce?
 - 2 yr. Trade Schools?
 - Jobs like electricians, plumbers, auto mechanics, diesel mechanics?

It is certainly true that there is a major shortage of workforce to fill those types of jobs. However, there is an often-forgotten category – at least with high school students -- that includes a wide assortment of excellent, high demand career positions in manufacturing!

- What do you think about when you hear the term MANUFACTURING jobs? Are your first thoughts that this is just a dark and dirty place with machine operators, welders, assemblers? Do you think to yourself, that is great for others, but I do not want my kid in a technical career, in manufacturing?

That may have been in the past, but it is NOT today.

TODAY's High Demand Manufacturing Careers include: Engineering technicians, Robotics and Automation developers, product development specialists, quality technicians, computer technicians, Accounting and Human Resource Generalists, Product and National Account Specialists, Direct and Indirect materials buyers, Production scheduling specialists – also known as Master Schedulers, Shipping Expeditors – including exporting coordinators and regulation coordinators, Inventory Control Managers...and many more!

- There are more than 700 manufacturing companies in North Dakota who account for nearly 8% of the total revenue output of the state, employing 6% of the total workforce. State revenue from manufacturing was over \$4 billion. There was an average of 26,000 manufacturing employees in North Dakota last year with an average annual compensation of more than \$60k.
- By the way, the non-farm income average in ND is less than \$50k.

As you consider support of the proposed Cass County Career Academy, I suggest there is no better way to inform our students and our under-employed population and our new Americans of the multiple high demand skilled careers that are in ND in the mfg. sector of our economy.

THIS is where I personally see the greatest value of the proposed Cass County CAREER WORKFORCE ACADEMY! To serve as a “A college-prep sequential curriculum with a focus on EXPOSING students to HIGH DEMAND TECHNICAL CAREERS before they leave high school – and then letting them pursue their area of interest.

To me, what is a bit ironic is that many people that I have spoken too – including many in the media, still consider the proposed Cass County Career Workforce Academy a new concept, experimental, an unproven model – when in fact there are more than 7000 career academies in the United States with more than a million students “annually”. One successful academy just happens to be located in Bismarck. The fact that Cass County does NOT have one is the exception.

What IS also very unique – especially to this area and even nationally -- is how the four different school districts of Cass County have COLLABORATIVELY, in the best interest of the students, have put aside rivalries and have joined the private sector to try to provide a SINGLE PLACE for Cass County k-14 students, incumbent workforce and new immigrants to go to learn about and to help prepare them for successful technical careers.

Of course, the alternative would be for each school district to fund / tax and to build its own – which I think that we can all agree is a far less financially efficient alternative.

In consideration of this unique opportunity to enhance workforce development in North Dakota, diversify our economy, and to offset the challenges we are still dealing with on the pandemic, we highly support the proposal to develop the Cass County Career Workforce Academy.

Thomas D. Shorma

CEO / President

WCCO Belting, Inc.