

Southeastern Connecticut, meet your new neighbors

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By **The Day Editorial Board** (/apps/pbcs.dll/personalia?ID=editorialboard)

The largest influx of workers into the region in decades is underway at Electric Boat. This is just the start of a demographic impact on housing, infrastructure, schools, traffic and social life, a welcome upswing that will rejuvenate the region — probably literally, by lowering the average age.

EB is so large — 15,600 employees — and expects to grow so much to meet its submarine building contracts with the U.S. Navy — to a workforce of 18,000 in 2030 — that its workers and their families could easily reach 10 percent of New London County's population if all of them lived here.

They don't all live here. However, EB itself, local municipalities and community groups are extending themselves beyond the usual Yankee neighbor ethos of live-and-let-live to actively welcome them, in hopes that they will.

Locally EB is on a scale by itself as a large and expanding employer offering jobs that traditionally have become lifelong, highly skilled careers. Despite the national trends away from working an entire career's length with one employer, Electric Boat, one of only two U.S. companies building submarines, wants its trained people to choose to stay on. For that, employees and families need to discover the pleasures of living here.

This place that is already one of the most beautiful and livable in the Northeast may need just a bit more cool, particularly for millennials in their 20s. We know this because they are telling us so.

The company takes advantage of what it can offer as a corporate culture that smaller employers cannot. Beyond the job satisfaction of highly skilled work it has enough people for scores of softball teams, an endless supply of peers the same age for new friends, and its EBAC program and human resources department offering employees connections with the community.

But there must be life outside of the company sphere. In collaboration with EB, some community groups are devising ways to make southeastern Connecticut feel like home to mostly-young designers, engineers and the shipyard workers now being hired for production of additional Virginia-class submarines.

After surveying Electric Boat employees and getting their candid responses about social life, sports, shopping and entertainment, the New London Roundtable, a group of cultural, educational and business leaders, found, not surprisingly, that one size doesn't fit all. The millennial age group wants spontaneous entertainment: a vibrant downtown and restaurants, bars and events that are easy to find when the mood hits. Others — many of them a little older, perhaps bringing spouses and children to their new community — told the Southeastern Connecticut Cultural Coalition they want a reliable pipeline about what's happening and where. They want more ability to plan.

The Chamber of Commerce of Eastern Connecticut, a partner in Thames River Innovation Place, a project being funded partly by a state grant, is launching Community Concierge. The program recruits newcomers and "connectors" who have lived and worked here a while to sign up, with the idea of pairing people with similar interests. The long-term plan includes relocation assistance and a database with such essentials as employment opportunities for spouses.

To get to the 18,000-person workforce of 2030, EB will have to hire 15,000 people or more, as older workers retire and others leave. Because there were long, lean periods of little hiring and even layoffs, the company has more employees ready to retire than there are middle-aged people to take over from them.

That rate of turnover will give EB and its community partners waves of new faces for the foreseeable future. It will transform the region at a scale last seen when Pfizer Inc. and the tribal casinos were hiring in the 1990s. Having grown resigned to long stretches with little hiring and few new people moving in, longtime residents and businesses need to welcome newcomers and the boost that means for Southeastern Connecticut.

The editorial board is composed of the publisher and four journalists of varied editing and reporting backgrounds. The board's discussions and information gained from its meetings with political, civic, and business leaders drive the institutional voice of The Day, as expressed in its editorials. The editorial department operates separately from the newsroom.