

# Fairbanks Morse Defense CEO discusses workforce at WMC event

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The head of Fairbanks Morse Defense says the Beloit company is “in for a rocky next couple months” after recently enacting a COVID-19 vaccination policy.

George Whittier, the company’s CEO, discussed workforce-related issues yesterday during Wisconsin Manufacturers and Commerce’s Business Day event in Pewaukee. As a recently rebranded company with a 150-year history of manufacturing, Whittier said “we’re pretty fortunate” to have significant name recognition.

The business transitioned from part of a public company to a private company a little over a year and a half ago, and “reinvented” with a new name and focus on the defense contracting market, Whittier explained.

“In our community, we have a great name, a great brand. People want to work there,” he said. “The biggest challenge we’re facing now, as I assume many of you are facing now, is COVID-19.”

Since the company provides engines for the Navy and Coast Guard, Whittier said employees would be required to show proof of vaccination in order to access most customer sites due to a Department of Defense mandate. He said it would be impossible to operate without accessing these sites, so the company decided last week to establish its own vaccine mandate.

“We know that we’re going to have some fallout, some repercussions for that,” he

said. “We’re hoping for the best, but there’s no question that we think we’re in for a rocky next couple months as we work through that. We’re going to have some folks decide to leave rather than be vaccinated.”

Over the past year and a half, Fairbanks Morse Defense has grown from about 450 employees to over 1,000, though most of that employee growth has been outside of the state. He said the company has added about 100 jobs in Wisconsin during that time.

“For the guys that work in the shop, we do all our recruiting locally. For engineers, accountants, some of the more salary folks, we would end up trying to recruit much more broadly, within a three-four state area,” he said.

Whittier pointed to a shortage of housing and education as top workforce challenges in the area. But he called Beloit a “wonderful community” that he uses as a selling point when recruiting skilled candidates, adding “we’re really fortunate to be there.”

*-By Alex Moe*