

Company makes prototype models for manufacturers

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U.S. Rep. Steny H. Hoyer (D-Md., 5th) made a quiet but important trip through Charles County last week, spreading the word about the initiative "Make It in America."

The Democratic agenda item's purpose is to promote and preserve the county's growth and manufacturing ability "so we can compete with the rest of the world," the House Democratic whip said during his stop at La Plata-based prototype and engineering firm protoCAD.

According to Hoyer, the goal of "Make It in America" is to promote business development in the United States and keep it here.

"What kind of policies are there to help people build businesses?" Hoyer asked. "They need to expand their markets to grow. We need to see how different people are involved in making things in America and how we might help at the federal level.

According to January figures from the U.S. Census Bureau, the country's international trade deficit for goods and services increased from \$374.9 billion to \$497.8 billion between 2009 and 2010 or \$122.9 billion over one year.

The country exported \$1.8 billion in goods and services in 2010 but imported \$2.3 billion. In 2009 those numbers were \$1.6 billion and \$1.9 billion, respectively.

The Census Bureau's data between 2006 and 2010 show that in 2006, 2007 and 2008, the

country spent roughly \$760 million more in imports than exports.

ProtoCAD started in 1993 under the guidance of Ron Minor and Brian Edwards. The two engineering friends are co-owners of the firm, which originally worked out of the basement of Colonial Liquors located on Crain Highway and across the parking lot from the current protoCAD aboveground office.

With the help of two other employees, the young men engineer product models for companies ranging from Black & Decker to Under Armor.

"It's much easier to get a product across [to potential buyers] when it's right there in front of you and you can pick it up. They can see the whole design," Edwards said.

"They do most things people don't think about getting done," Hoyer said.

"This gives you an opportunity to put [the product] in your hand."

Behind the doors of protoCAD's modest office, a two-dimensional image on a computer can become an actual object in a matter of hours thanks to the work of a 3-D printer or one of three casting processes.

A company will contact protoCAD with an idea, and through a number of e-mails and photos the two parties will agree on what the prototype should have and what it will look like.

"We can do the whole thing or a part of it," Edwards said.

According to protoCAD's website, www.protocad.com, the firm has made product casts as large as 42 inches by 36 inches by 15 inches.

Under the Obama administration "we're all very focused on winning the future," Hoyer said.

Hoyer said that protoCAD is an example of what a business is and can be in America.

While there are only four people now, there is an opportunity — and hopefully a market — to successfully grow their company just like Bill Gates did in his garage with Microsoft and Mark Zuckerberg did with Facebook in his dorm room.

"Make It" implies both the actual production of something, Hoyer said, and the vernacular term for success.

"[The United States is] the center of development and innovation in the world. Period," Hoyer said. "We need to figure out how to make it profitable to 'make it' here in America and we need to figure out how to 'make it' profitably."

As for what can happen locally to promote a thriving business, Edwards and Minor said the county should make it easy to operate.

"If the county can identify hurdles businesses have, it would be beneficial to have help in those areas," Edwards said.

In mid-February, the county commissioners announced Eugene T. Lauer as the interim economic development director. Prior to the announcement the county had been without a leader in the position, or a department for him to lead, after the former board of commissioners disbanded the department to help cover budget losses and redirect the area's vision for commercial development.