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\$30 million from Navy to bolster maritime workforce education in Alabama

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Bradley Byrne, president and CEO of the Mobile Chamber, speaks about U.S. Navy funding for Alabama Community College System programs that are relevant to shipbuilding. Lawrence Specker | LSpecker@AL.com



State and local officials gathered Monday in Mobile to celebrate Alabama's next step into the submarine business: A \$30 million U.S. Navy commitment to fund maritime programs at community colleges.



The announcement took place at the Maritime Museum of the Gulf, where attendees had a view of [Austal USA's](#) facilities on the other side of the Mobile River. These include MMF3, a new structure that will allow Austal to greatly expand [the work it is already doing to build internal sections of nuclear submarines](#).

The occasion also closely followed news that a former railcar facility in north Alabama [will be turned into a submarine components plant](#). Involving a claimed investment of \$2.4 billion, that project is expected to create more than 1,000 jobs.

Backers said the Navy funding will help Alabama's community colleges train the workers needed to staff new facilities such as Austal's expansion and the north Alabama plant. According to a statement from the Alabama Community College System (ACCS), the money "will enable the colleges to expand their submarine manufacturing and shipbuilding training programs."



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"Over the course of the next decade, the maritime workforce demand in this state is expected to grow by over 10,000 people," said Lindsay Cline, who represented the Navy's [Maritime Industrial Base Program](#). "Pipe welders, pipefitters, ship fitters, structural welders, electricians, engineers, industrial maintenance professionals, and the list goes on. But I want to be very clear today we are not here just to train skilled trade professionals. We are here to train maritime experts."

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Cline said that in southwest Alabama, the funding would bolster programs offered by Bishop State Community College and Coastal Alabama Community College in Mobile and Baldwin counties, plus Reid State Community College in Conecuh County, and Lurleen B. Wallace Community College in Covington County.

She said the ACCS will offer maritime training programs at all 24 of its colleges across the state.

Olivier Charles, president of Bishop State, spoke to the scope of the effort.

“With the Navy’s \$30 million investment into Alabama’s community colleges, we’re taking a bold, concerted effort to build our nation’s workforce pipeline specifically towards maritime and more specifically around submarine construction,” said Charles. “Together, we’re advancing opportunities, we’re modernizing facilities, and we’re aligning our programs to meet the real needs of the industry.

“Because when we get this right, what we’ll see is that we’ll have more submarines built, we’ll see a stronger, more resilient workforce,” said Charles. “We’ll see more Alabamians that are able to have and provide a sustainable income for their families. And ultimately, we are ensuring that our nation is safe. And I cannot reiterate that enough.”

Charles said the workforce development effort would help make Alabama “the Silicon Valley of shipbuilding.”

“We are building this together with leadership from the Alabama Community College system, with the support of our state and our local partners, with the support of industry partners like Austal and others in the maritime sector, and most importantly, with the trust of the United States Navy,” he said. “This is what collaboration looks like. An entire community college system working with industry, working with education to meet one goal.”

“This is going to change lives,” said U.S. Rep. Shomari Figures, D-Mobile. “It is going to change thousands of lives.”

“\$30 million is a lot,” Figures said. “But I’m sure everyone can attest, it’s not enough to get the job done. And so my job as a member of Congress is to ensure that we keep the money flowing. To that end we will continue to submit direct appropriations request to further facilitate what is going on down here, because we know this is the future.”

Navy workforce development money

****\$30 Million Investment:** **The Navy has committed \$30 million to enhance maritime workforce training at all 24 community colleges in Alabama, addressing the expected demand for over 10,000 new maritime workers in the next decade.

****Job Creation:** **The investment is part of Alabama's efforts to prepare for 5,000 new maritime jobs, particularly in submarine manufacturing, with a focus on training welders, pipefitters, and electricians.

****Statewide Impact:** **The funding supports submarine manufacturing and shipbuilding programs across various community colleges, aiming to position Alabama as a significant player in the maritime industry.

Bradley Byrne, president and CEO of the Mobile Chamber, said that his experiences as a congressman and as former ACCS chancellor made it clear to him that the Navy funding, and the programs it will support, were the result of an extraordinary group effort. He praised ACCS Chancellor Jimmy Baker, among others.

“Without the chancellor this sort of meeting would not have been possible,” Byrne said. “A lot of people in the positions in this room weren’t even talking to one another. But we’re talking today. More than talking, we’re doing it.”

“The fastest growing sector of our economy, the one that gets our attention day after day after day, is maritime because it’s growing so fast,” said Byrne. “It’s driven by national security needs and it’s driven by strong private investment. And when that sector is thriving, the impact shows up everywhere. Our restaurants are full, our small businesses are growing and families are putting down roots. That’s how you know you’ve got real economic growth.”

Gene Miller, interim president of Austal USA, said focused workforce development efforts are already bearing some fruit. But the need is exploding, he said.

“Building the world’s most advanced naval vessels requires highly trained, highly skilled professionals,” he said. “People who are dedicated to precision, discipline and continuous learning. That’s why the investment in the Alabama Community College System is so important.

“Over the next five years, our industry will need more than 5,000 new maritime workers across the Gulf Coast,” Miller said. “Our local partners, Bishop State and Coastal Alabama, have already launched pipeline training classes in support of Alabama’s and Austal’s submarine program, focusing on shipfitting, pipefitting and electrical work. This initiative has already provided nearly 100 new shipbuilders with the opportunities to start rewarding careers in this vital industry.

“Shipbuilding is about more than steel and more than systems. It’s about people,” Miller said. “Welders, fitters, electricians and technicians who meet the highest standards of quality and safety. These skills must be taught, practiced and perfected. And that starts in our classrooms and training labs.”

Baker seconded Byrne’s point that the announcement reflected a new era of collaboration. When he served as the state’s finance director in the late ‘90s, he said, the state was trying to figure out how to fund workforce development for its new and growing automobile manufacturing sector.

“In the wisdom of those who made the decisions, the automobile manufacturers, the people who owned the automobile business, made no contribution to the cost of training people,” Baker said. “So it fell my job to figure out how is the state going to do this and how can we afford it. It’s a different ball game today.”

The impact of the nation’s new focus on military shipbuilding could have a bigger impact on Alabama than the auto industry has, he said.

“This can be even greater. This can be game changing,” Baker said. “If we are doing this across the state of Alabama and doing a good job, we are providing a way so many of our citizens can have the opportunity to make life better. And that’s really what we’re about.”



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Lawrence Specker

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✉ LSpecker@AL.com ✕

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