



## *Office of the Mayor*

### **The 2025 Cobourg Mayor's Manufacturing Tour**

Throughout the summer of 2025, Mayor Lucas Cleveland, in partnership with Darla Price, Executive Director of the Northumberland Manufacturers' Association (NMA), embarked on an in-depth Manufacturing Tour across Cobourg's industrial community.

Over several weeks, they visited eight cornerstone employers — Lorenz Conveying Products, Beneco Custom Print Packaging, Belden Canada, Core Molding Technologies, Custom Plastics International, Limpact International, Graphic Packaging International, Post Foods Canada, and Lakeland Multi-Trade — representing the full diversity of Cobourg's manufacturing and trades economy.

The tour's purpose was straightforward yet profound: to listen. At each stop, the Mayor and Ms. Price met with frontline workers, HR teams, and executives to discuss challenges and potential solutions. These meetings revealed a consistent set of insights: pride in local production, acute and significant housing strain, a lack of tradespeople, a need for greater retention and the need for faster permitting and youth engagement.

At Lakeland Multi-Trade, conversations expanded to trades competition and apprenticeship barriers, showing that housing, trades, and manufacturing share one regional workforce ecosystem. The difficulty of Lakeland in retaining a variety of tradespeople was echoed during all visits to the individual manufacturers.

The tour confirmed that Cobourg's manufacturers are deeply invested in their community but constrained by structural barriers. This report synthesizes those findings with verified data from the Workforce Development Board, Lightcast, and Statistics Canada.

#### **1. The Northumberland Manufacturers' Association (NMA)**

Founded two decades ago through a partnership of local industrial leaders and Nventure (NCFDC), the NMA has become one of Ontario's most effective manufacturing associations. It connects firms, advocates for favourable business conditions, and fosters innovation, training, and community engagement.



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Major NMA Achievements include:

- Energy Advocacy: Led a provincial delegation that reformed the Global Adjustment Rate, reducing energy costs.
- County-Wide Transit Pilot: Created a night-shift bus service linking industrial parks and health facilities.
- Youth Career Pathways: Donated equipment and coordinated apprenticeship placements.
- How It's Made – Northumberland: Canada's first open-house manufacturing event.
- Smart Manufacturing Forum: Canada's first secure collaboration portal for industry.
- VFactory VR Training: Canada's first virtual-reality recruitment and training tool for manufacturing, developed with Venture13.

### **2. Economic Context and Local Investment**

Cobourg's manufacturers have invested over \$15 million since 2023 in automation, facility expansion, and workforce training. Approximately 3,000 residents — about 14 percent of the population — work in manufacturing, the town's largest private-sector employer group. Currently there are millions more in applications to both the federal and provincial government for further expansion due to the opportunities and difficulties of the ongoing tariff issues with the US.

Across Northumberland County, the manufacturing sector contributes roughly \$866 million GDP, a quarter of regional economic output.

### **3. Workforce Profile and Demographics**

1,520 people currently work in Cobourg's manufacturing facilities; 970 Cobourg residents hold manufacturing jobs. One-third of this workforce is aged 55 or older, indicating succession and retention pressures.

The town hosts 70 manufacturing firms, 47 with employees and 30 with ten or more staff. Eleven are mid-sized (50–199 employees), forming a strong SME industrial core.



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### **4. Subsector Composition and Adjusted Growth Outlook (2025–2030)**

Adjusted for a 5% higher projected growth rate than at present, Cobourg expects approximately 86 new manufacturing jobs by 2030 — a 4.3% net increase.

Growth concentrations include electrical equipment (+13.1%), chemicals (+13.3%), plastics (+6.5%), and printing (+16%). These gains position Cobourg as a leader in clean chemistry and sustainable manufacturing.

### **5. The Workforce-Housing Crisis**

All eight firms visited — and many more across the County — identified housing affordability as the single largest barrier to retention. Two employees earning \$25/hour cannot afford the average \$2,000 rent.

Between 2017 and 2023, Northumberland lost 159 young adults (18–24) while gaining nearly 5,000 older working-age residents. Without attainable rentals, younger tradespeople cannot settle locally.

Manufacturers advocate for:

- Purpose-built rentals (\$1,200–\$1,600/month)
- Multiplexes and secondary suites near transit
- Modular workforce housing on or near employment land
- Rental-first incentives: DC deferrals, tax grants, fast-track approvals

Housing inaction now functions as a productivity constraint: unfilled jobs mean lost output and deferred investment.

### **6. Supporting Infrastructure: Venture13 (V13)**

Located in Cobourg's Northam Industrial Park, Venture13 (V13) serves as the region's innovation and entrepreneurship hub — a joint initiative of the Town of Cobourg, Nventure, and the Northumberland Manufacturers' Association (NMA). Since opening in 2018, V13 has provided flexible workspace, training facilities, and technology supports that link traditional industry with next-generation innovation.



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### **VFactory: Canada's First VR Manufacturing Training Platform**

In October 2025, Venture13 became home to VFactory, Canada's first Virtual Reality (VR) recruitment and training platform for manufacturing. Developed by Nventure and the NMA through Ontario's Skills Development Fund and built by Ontario-based immersive firm XpertVR, the platform enables workers and students to experience realistic factory environments — sound, pace, and workflow — before stepping onto a production floor. VFactory was created to reduce turnover, support youth and career transitions, attract underrepresented groups, and strengthen partnerships between employers, educators, and workforce agencies. Its launch positions Cobourg as a national leader in immersive manufacturing training and validates the community's investment in V13 as a forward-thinking facility.

While V13 addresses the skills gap, its success underscores the urgency of addressing the housing gap. Without attainable housing for newly trained workers, the benefits of these workforce initiatives cannot be fully realized. V13 and VFactory should therefore be viewed as core components of Cobourg's integrated workforce strategy — uniting training, housing, and infrastructure for long-term industrial growth.

### **7. Strengths and Pressures**

Strengths include \$15 million invested in two years, strong NMA coordination, skilled and diversified SME base, and new training assets like Venture13 and VFactory. Pressures include housing shortages, rising energy costs, an aging workforce, permitting delays, and youth out-migration.

### **8. Strategic Recommendations**

- Workforce Housing Acceleration Plan (2025–2026) – Identify employment-linked housing zones and fast-track approvals.
- Manufacturing Workforce Council – Unite Town, County, NMA, and employers to monitor vacancy rates and progress quarterly.
- Transit Expansion – Reinstate NMA's night-shift transit and improve cycling access.
- Training Expansion – Scale VFactory with college partnerships and new apprenticeships.
- "Proud to Build in Cobourg" Campaign – Celebrate manufacturing success stories.



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### **9. Looking Ahead: Emerging Pressures**

Cobourg's near-term future will be shaped by a housing-construction surge and the anticipated nuclear build in Port Hope. Both will generate high-paying construction jobs that compete for the same skilled trades relied upon by manufacturers, leading to potential wage inflation and rental pressure.

### **10. Conclusion**

Cobourg's manufacturers are innovative and resilient, but the sector's sustainability depends on coordinated investment in housing, energy, and workforce planning. The 2025 Manufacturing Tour confirmed both urgency and optimism: a community ready to act, provided leadership continues to link economic growth with human infrastructure.

