

“Japan – WV trade mission finishes on a busy note”
06/04/2005

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The Charleston Gazette

Nagoya, Japan – The West Virginia trade mission to Japan ended Friday with a whirlwind of visits to a university and three manufacturing plants. West Virginians spoke with Japanese students perfecting their English in a language class at Aichi Shukutoku University, a private school with a partnership with West Virginia University. Meanwhile, Gov. Joe Manchin met with additional business prospects. Each of the classrooms the delegation visited had state-of-the-art computers and about 20 students in each class. The students were learning English for business situations. A third of the class was spent on computers that combined audio and written techniques. Then, students used textbooks and listened to the language.

First Lady Gayle Manchin – a former English teacher – said she was impressed with the high technology level and that the class was focused on learning business vocabulary. “In the business world, there’s specific words,” she said. “I think it’s good because the students appreciate what they’re learning will be useful.” The students were also preparing for the Test of English for International communication. An increasing number of businesses – both those that do business globally and locally – want students to be proficient in English and have a certain test score, said the class’ teacher Sharell Ann Reintsma.

Manchin told the students that the world was getting smaller and technology could bring people together. “I encourage you to study hard. It will take you where you want to go,” she said. Then, the group toured NGK’s ceramic sensor plant in Komaki. Workers make and sell spark plugs, oxygen sensors and other components for internal combustion engines. They also make and sell industrial ceramics for semi-conductors and communication equipment. NGK has a facility in Sissonville where workers make oxygen sensors. The plant is celebrating its 10th anniversary this year. About 10,000 people work for the company worldwide. About 300 employees work specifically in research and development in order to survive in the industry’s very competitive environment.

NGK would like to increase production but has to wait and see what shakes out with the “Big Three” (General Motors, Ford and Chrysler), said Ken Minoha, the former Sissonville plant manager. The company is always thinking about diversification and is always hoping to expand. “We have possibilities, but we’re watching the markets,” said President Dr. Michio Kato. NGK is considering expanding its distribution facilities to include an after market warehouse because an increasing number of customers are buying NGK’s sensors and sparkplugs in retail stores, which is helping the company’s bottom line.

Plus, NGK could expand the diesel and hybrid market. “The hybrid business is going to grow tremendously,” said Tom Wetzel, vice president of NGK USA. “But in terms of future growth, who knows? We’re projecting like everyone else.” Hybrid vehicles use more sensors but fewer spark plugs than traditional cars, he said. The delegation also visited the 340-acre Kani Industrial Park and two companies inside. Almost half of the park’s 54 tenants are automotive related. Other companies in the park make airplane, machinery and housing implement products. Members of the park’s association say the 31-year-old facility is the largest of its kind in Japan and its completely full.