

High tech in Reno needs public and private investment | Opinion

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Reno is home to a growing number of technology companies, advanced manufacturers, logistics providers, and even geothermal energy startups. There are many well-known brands in Reno but there also are lesser-known companies that are critical suppliers across all these industries. Small businesses truly are the backbone of the nation's economy, and every high technology industry relies on microelectronics. Computer chips and printed circuit boards (PCBs) are embedded in everything from phones to F-150s and fighter jets.

VSE in Reno is one of the companies providing microelectronics to aerospace, biotechnology, telecom and medical customers. VSE is a woman-owned certified business started 30 years ago and now has facilities on Prototype Drive in Reno and another facility in San Jose, California. VSE's nationwide workforce of 250 employees does contract manufacturing for local and global customers.'

VSE produces tools used in semiconductor manufacturing, makes power supplies and laser machines and does assembly of PCBs. PCBs are rarely seen by the end users of electronic devices, but every computer chip needs a PCB to function. VSE takes bare PCB boards and customizes them for use across the country and across the world.

When VSE was established 30 years ago, the U.S. produced 30% of the world's PCBs. Today our national standing has fallen to just 4%. This happened as manufacturing and assembly was offshored to companies – mostly in Asia and the majority in China – where low labor rates and hefty government subsidies pushed American companies out of the market. There were once over 2,000 PCB companies in the U.S. Today there are fewer than 150.

Because PCBs are inside every national defense and critical infrastructure system, we need to reshore and restore the American PCB and substrate industry. When semiconductor production fell to 13% of the world supply, the CHIPS Act provided an injection of capital, which was matched by hundreds of billions in private investment. A similar level of public-private investment is needed for PCBs.

The Protecting Printed Circuit Boards and Substrates (PCBS) Act, H.R. 3597, would help reshore and restore the industry. The bill provides a 25% tax incentive for the purchase of American-made PCBs and integrated circuit substrates, federal financial assistance for facility expansion and research and development. Likewise, the Department of Commerce and other federal agencies must create policies that support the entire technology stack. If we do nothing, nothing changes.