Strong voice for STEM
Board chairman of National Grid backs workforce development
By Larry Rulison
Published 8:12 pm, Tuesday, August 5, 2014

Albany

The chairman of the board of National Grid PLC was in Albany Tuesday to get a firsthand look at one of the British utility's most promising U.S. customers.

Sir Peter Gershon, a longtime business leader and civil servant in Great Britain who has served as chairman of National Grid since 2012, toured the former SUNY College of Nanoscale Science and Engineering — now called SUNY Polytechnic Institute.

Gershon, who studied mathematics at Cambridge University and worked for decades in the computer and telecommunications industries, became the chief executive of the Office of Government Commerce, a unit of the U.K. government that works for the prime minister.

"I passionately believe that countries that have a very firm foundation in STEM will have success in the world economy," Gershon said. "I've been really encouraged here."

The Albany visit was just one stop Gershon made Tuesday in the region with Ken Daly, president of National Grid's New York operations.

The other stop was at a new substation National Grid is building outside of Amsterdam in the town of Florida to replace one destroyed during flooding from the Mohawk River in the aftermath of tropical storms Irene and Lee in 2011.

Daly brought Gershon to SUNY Poly to speak with local educators who work with National Grid on science and technology programs, much of it in partnership with SUNY Poly and other local schools and colleges.

The utility has invested heavily in STEM (i.e. science, technology, engineering and math) education in the Capital Region in recent years as the technology sector has grown.

The investments span from programs at a local children's museum, to Tech Valley High School, to the University at Albany and Union Graduate College.

"It really does need to start as early as age 2," Daly said of the need for robust science learning in the region.

"It's getting them into the pipeline," he said.

Daly says that while National Grid does provide money to many of the programs, the bulk of the company's assistance comes from employee volunteers.
For instance, National Grid employees helped Union Graduate College launch a new business of energy certificate program that could eventually be made into a master's degree.

"The most complex business in the world is the business of energy," said Robert Kozik, dean of Union Graduate College's School of Engineering, who crafted the curriculum in partnership with National Grid and others.

Daly said National Grid's motivation for investing in science and technology education isn't for the public relations benefits.

He said the No. 1 reason is to train future National Grid employees, but also to train people who will work in the energy industry that serves National Grid.

The other reason is to train workers for the high-tech industry — a growing part of National Grid's customer base in the Capital Region.

Without a steady flow of workers, those companies, such as GlobalFoundries, IBM and General Electric Co., will look elsewhere to hire workers.

lrulison@timesunion.com • 518-454-5504 •