

High-speed internet, workforce housing, education top list of Midcoast economic drivers

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Continuing education, workforce housing, and high-speed internet access emerged as potential drivers of improved work opportunities during a recent presentation to Camden Rotary Club by Bill Najpauer, executive director of the [Mid Coast Economic Development District](#) (MCEDD).

MCEDD is a municipally led economic and community development organization serving Sagadahoc, Lincoln, and Knox counties — plus Brunswick, Harpswell, and Lincolnville. Its economic development strategy incorporates economic, community and workforce development, education, transportation, and environmental projects.

Najpauer's talk focused on the coastal area between Damariscotta and Searsport, where the largest employers are educational, health, and social services. These fields employ nearly one-fourth of workers in the Midcoast. Retail and manufacturing jobs are also significant, followed by food service, arts, and recreation; the professions, management, and administration; and construction.

The region's challenges include the decline in the number of residents aged 25 to 44, and the increasing number of retirees. Yet the area benefits from relatively high educational levels: About 60 percent of residents having bachelor's degrees, associate degrees, or some college credits.

The availability of college programs, including those offered by technology schools, bodes well for the region as technology and changing business models bring new job opportunities that call for additional training. Najpauer noted that people entering the workforce today could expect to change careers – not just jobs – several times during their working lives. So educational opportunities, whether in the form of in-house or external training, will be crucial. Traditional jobs in the trades, as plumbers, mechanics, electricians, and landscapers, also call for training, and there is a high demand for workers to enter these fields.

Najpauer highlighted two key issues that, if resolved, would improve the region's economic prospects: spotty access to high-speed internet services and the lack of workforce housing. He noted that housing costs keep many potential workers, even highly skilled workers, from accepting positions here.

"We've determined over the years that the best way to approach workforce housing is with a regional plan so that we could identify communities that are open to the idea of affordable housing projects," he said. "We would also want communities to identify land parcels, whether they be private or publicly held, to make available for workforce housing. The regional approach would enable us to maximize investment in areas that have the most capacity for affordable housing."

Najpauer said that the COVID pandemic has emphasized the inequities between areas with and without high-quality internet service. When schools closed this spring, students lacking reliable internet access struggled to stay connected. Also, providing broadband service more widely would increase the region's attraction for remote workers, many of whom need to download large files

“Most of the coast has internet service, some of it at minimum or adequate standards. But professionals who work remotely – particularly those who need to upload large documents —need higher speeds at affordable prices.” Najpauer said.

Najpauer’s presentation was the second in a monthly series the club is hosting to foster learning about and finding creative solutions for economic challenges in the Midcoast. In the first talk, Martha Bentley, director of economic development coordination for the State of Maine, provided an overview of the State’s 10-year economic development strategy last month.

On November 10, Jason Judd will tell club members and guests about the work of [MaineSpark](#), a 10-year effort by Maine’s most influential education and business leaders to work together to ensure that Maine’s workforce is productive and competitive.

This collaboration brings together schools and universities, nonprofits and foundations, government agencies, and businesses to position Mainers for success through education and workforce credentials. Anyone who would like to attend can obtain connection details from Stephanie Griffin: steph.griffinsg00@gmail.com.

Jonathan Goss, the club’s president-elect, is leading the club’s efforts to provide a forum for discussing economic and workforce development issues.

“We want to learn as much as we can about the economic challenges our region faces and identify how Rotarians can make a difference,” said Goss. “In the process, we wish to foster connections among people from different towns and organizations by bringing them together for these presentations.”