

Camden Rotary Club launches economic and workforce development speaker series

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The Camden Rotary Club recently kicked off a monthly series of presentations designed to help its members learn about state and local economic issues and develop practical steps Rotarians can take to facilitate and promote local economic and workforce development.

Martha Bentley, director of economic development coordination for the State of Maine, gave the club and guests from local governments, business associations, neighboring Rotary clubs and other organizations an overview of the state's 10-year economic development strategy document, A Focus on Talent and Innovation.

Introduced in November 2019, the non-partisan strategy incorporates input from more than 1500 Mainers who attended regional meetings or submitted ideas individually. More than 50 volunteers worked in committees over a nine-month period to look at available data, consider ideas, gather public and industry feedback, and develop the final strategies.

This process reflects the plan's key theme: "There is a place in the Maine economy for everyone."

"The strategy is not just for the state government," Bentley said, in a news release. "It's a roadmap for collaboration and alignment of resources and efforts – and a strategy for multiple stakeholders."

The strategy's three primary goals are to increase the average wage, increase the number of workers in Maine by 75,000 and raise productivity. To that end, the plan has seven key strategies: grow local talent; attract new talent; promote innovation; support ubiquitous connectivity by working toward affordable high-speed internet access throughout the state; provide supporting infrastructure including adequate childcare and housing; maintain a stable business environment; and promote hubs of excellence, local economic engines whose strengths in education and enterprise have an economic impact across the state.

Bentley noted a variety of initiatives already underway. For example, MaineSpark, a public-private coalition of schools, universities, government agencies, and businesses, aims to ensure that by 2025, 60% of Mainers will hold education and workforce credentials that position Maine and its families for success. Opportunities Aroostook is attracting talent to the Presque Isle area, and programs at the newly established Roux Institute associated with Northeastern University align with Maine's talent needs.

The state-run Welcome Home Program seeks to attract remote workers and people from needed talent sectors to live and work in Maine. Its efforts include simplifying the credentialing process so newcomers can work at their highest and best use while they work toward receiving state credentials.

While the COVID-19 pandemic has slowed some efforts, it has also confirmed others, notably the need for robust internet connections throughout the state, improved infrastructure for childcare and affordable housing. The pandemic has also brought some unexpected opportunities, including Maine's attraction of workers currently untethered from corporate offices. The pandemic has also demonstrated

that the state's government can innovate when necessary, for example, by switching to electronic copies of legal documents and conducting virtual public hearings. And Maine companies have shown that they can pivot to new markets rapidly and even benefit public health and safety, as demonstrated by Idexx and Abbott Labs.

Bentley acknowledged that there are potential roadblocks ahead. High construction costs threaten the ability to provide affordable housing. Shrinking revenues could put transportation infrastructure at risk. And COVID-19 continues to present uncertainties. But these challenges reinforce the need for everyone to play a role in Maine's economic progress.

Bentley encouraged audience members to download and read the strategy document. And she shared some questions that she and her colleagues frequently ask themselves: "When should state government collaborate, when should state government amplify the voices of others and the good works that have been done, and when should state government simply get out of the way? I invite you to help me think through how we can help continue to bring active citizens like yourselves into this process."

Camden Rotary Club invites the public to attend the next presentation in this series at noon on Tuesday, October 13, when William Najpauer of the Midcoast Economic Development District will share an overview of the region's unique economic and workforce needs. For Zoom connection details, contact Stephanie French <steph.griffinsg00@gmail.com>.