

INNOVATION AND ENTREPRENEURS ARE KEY

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To grow a new prosperity in Maine we need to embrace the idea that creativity, innovation, and entrepreneurship are the driving forces of the next economy, and not just something that we tack on to a long list of things we're interested in. It requires that we get behind our innovators and entrepreneurs in a big way, to ensure that they have the tools they need to succeed.

Building that kind of economy requires us to create a culture that encourages and supports innovators and entrepreneurs, where we're not afraid to think big, take risks, stumble if necessary on the path forward, and seize our full potential. It also requires us to create an innovation ecosystem that makes starting, running, and growing businesses easier.

Here's a little-known secret about the economy: innovative companies grow faster, have higher profits, and pay higher wages. It doesn't matter whether they're big or small, high tech or no tech, in a city or in rural areas. Innovation can happen in new industries or older ones, in for-profits or not-for-profits and in multigenerational companies that are constantly reinventing themselves, or start-ups and scale-ups working in garages, small offices or new campuses.

After all, innovation simply means a new idea or way of doing things or a new product that somebody somewhere cares enough about to buy. Most Maine companies start with a new idea; the real trick is to keep innovating.

And, innovative companies end up in places that support the creativity it takes to constantly learn and grow, place where it's all right to say: I don't know. I need to learn more. I fail a lot. This is why innovative companies can often be found in the same places where there are lot of artists, writers, and other creative people.

The question now is: how can Maine accelerate that growth? How can we create more budding entrepreneurs and help more existing businesses and emerging success stories to innovate, and to believe in themselves enough to leap to the next level? And how can we create the communities where these companies and entrepreneurs will thrive?

We've struggled for years to find the right path to a new prosperity, looking in all directions and chasing one fad after another. Meanwhile, the foundations of tomorrow's economy are all around us, in our communities and in our new and existing companies.

There are two distinctly different paths forward for Maine's economy. One is to continue to chase the dream of attracting big companies to Maine that will provide thousands of jobs overnight. Think of that as the "hitting the lottery" approach, or a hunting expedition that's all about catching a woolly mammoth, where we dangle lots of tax breaks and goodies on the end of a line.

We've been looking for those big deals for decades, and it hasn't produced much of anything. Even if it had, it's an extremely expensive way to grow an economy that leaves us vulnerable to the ups and downs of a few large employers. And to be competitive with the states in the South for whom this is a way of life, we would have to invest millions of dollars more each year in this effort.

The other way forward is to build tomorrow's economy from the ground up, on a firm foundation of our strengths and skills, our powerful brand, and our talent for invention. That is an approach that appreciates the value of building the next economy one new job at a time and has us investing in ourselves rather than in big tax breaks. It leads us to invest in better education, grants and loans to start and expand businesses, and research and development that can fuel both new and existing businesses that want to create new products and services, invent new business models, or streamline their operations.

It also suggest that we invest in our communities, in our historic buildings and downtowns, whose unique character provides an antidote to the cookie-cutter and antiseptic places that many entrepreneurs want to avoid. We should recognize that creativity and innovation can provide the focus and impetus to bring back the economies of our towns, big and small, by attracting young entrepreneurs, their energy, ideas, and talents.

Lastly, investing in innovation means that we have to embrace a more diverse and tolerant culture, because that's what it takes for creativity to flourish. Good ideas often come from the collisions of knowledge from difference disciplines, cultures or perspectives. Diverse and tolerant places also attract creative people, who in turn attract the highly educated knowledge workers who will power

Maine's next economy.

Some of that ecosystem is already in place, with organizations like the Finance Authority of Maine, the Maine Technology Institute, the Maine Center for Entrepreneurial Development, and promising initiatives in education. But to become a state that is really an incubator of new ideas and products, we're going to need to put that small infrastructure on steroids, and build a seamless "feeder system" that encourages budding entrepreneurs and startups to move toward becoming tomorrow's success stories.

It means building a network of communities – some call them "innovation hubs" – that support entrepreneurs where they are, while also linking them into a broader ecosystem in Maine and across the country. It means making sure there are places where entrepreneurs and innovators can gather and work together, to learn from one another and partner with each other and with more established companies. It means teaming together to share our knowledge and resources, rather than each starting from scratch.

We have an opportunity today to build a new economy in Maine, propelled by creativity, innovation, and entrepreneurship and relying upon the resourcefulness of Maine people. We can rebuild and revitalize our communities in the same way, bringing back our young people and attracting newcomers, to enjoy a vibrant economy.