

# Young professionals set sights on keeping talent in state

Bangor Daily News

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May 11, 2011

ORONO, Maine — There are a number of perceptions the state has to fight in order to help attract young people to live and work here — including the concept that they shouldn't leave in the first place.

That was one of the ideas that came out of a meeting of young professionals who came together from Aroostook County and the Bangor area to discuss ways to promote in-migration and community involvement among their peers. Roughly 55 people, mainly 20- and 30-somethings, met for three hours at the University of Maine's Buchanan Alumni House.

While a big impediment to attracting or keeping young people is a lack of jobs, there are opportunities here that are augmented by the quality of life, the group said after meeting in breakout sessions.

"We really need our young people to take charge, for our future," said Billi Blanchard of Presque Isle. "We need to show the world we're diverse from north to south, we have four seasons, we have fishing, farming, we still have industry."

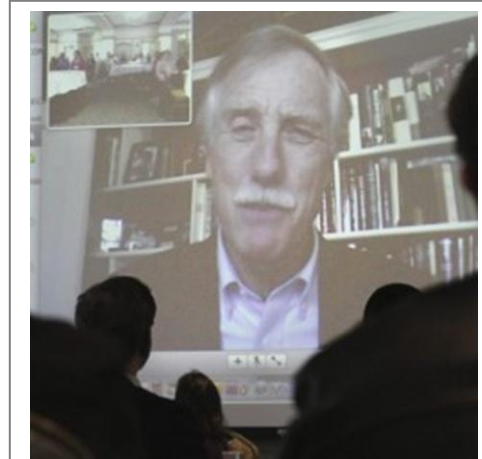
The first-ever Maine Young Professional Exchange was a meeting of the Fusion Bangor, Momentum Aroostook and Realize Maine Network groups. Johann Sabbath, chairman of Realize Maine, said former Gov. John Baldacci initially held a conference in 2004 to talk about in-migration and demographics. The exchange, said Sabbath, was a continuation of that discussion.

The goal is to have several exchanges like this around the state, to throw around ideas and look for best practices for communities, businesses, schools and other groups to attract young people to Maine, he said. They want to look at similarities between young Mainers who left for work and have come back, and those who stayed to work and have succeeded, he said. The term "professional" is a bit of a misnomer, said Sabbath — the groups were interested in attracting "white collar, green collar, blue collar, no collar."

After coming up with the best ideas, the group plans to work with the Maine Development Foundation to write a report to present to the state, Sabbath said.

The perspective of young workers was important, said Scott Violette, chairman of Momentum Aroostook's steering committee. They are potentially not jaded, and it is hoped they have a lot of energy and enthusiasm. They also may have different ideas on how to move the state forward and more thoughts on how to use technology for advancement.

Young people leave the county, said Violette, "like birds migrating south." The trick, he said, is to figure out how to encourage them to come back north, back to the state.



Michael C. York

Former Maine Gov. Angus King speaks to young professionals from around the state using Skype at the University of Maine Buchanan House on fostering in-migration and community engagement.

The group suggested selling the assets of the state, including the UMaine system, which they said was progressive and affordable. The state should target visitors who have experienced Maine, the group said, such as those who have summer homes here or who vacation here.

Graduates from Maine's colleges often move so they can make more money in a metropolitan area out of state, the group said. But those graduates also should be made aware of the fact that the cost of living likely will be higher there, as well.

Some of the impediments to attracting people here include the perceptions that Maine is set in its ways and that there's a lack of diversity.

Former Gov. Angus King opened the exchange with an address via live video. He said that he immigrated to the state 42 years ago, having grown up in Virginia. King gave a list of what he thought were the top 10 reasons people should consider moving to Maine. Number 10 was that people felt so safe and secure that many never lock their doors. Number nine was the access to oceans and ski mountains. Eight was that the state's "scale" was right.

"In this community and this state as a whole, you can make a difference," he said.

Seven — Maine is a state of common sense and openness. Six — we have four seasons. Five — "the bank teller probably knows your name." Four — you can get the advantages of an urban area such as getting the New York Times delivered without the disadvantages. Three — with technological advances, professionals "can work where they live, instead of living where they work." Two — Maine is a great place to raise a family.

And one — "Maine is a community. It's a big small town," he said. "It's hard to put a number on community, but it's real, it's important."

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