

Creating community

FusionBangor sees results from young professionals network

BY SHIRAR PATTERSON

Program director of FusionBangor, a networking and professional development group of young professionals in the Bangor region

Over the last few years, many small businesses in greater Bangor have not only survived, but grown during these difficult economic times. Establishments have adapted to change and new restaurants and retail stores have opened in downtown Bangor and its surrounding communities such as Orono and Hermon. Bangor real estate values and sales have remained stable and there is great opportunity for young professionals to buy in this welcoming market. Bangor's strong real estate market has been an outstanding complement to the growth and ingenuity of the area's small businesses.

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people in Bangor who are skilled,

have college degrees and are eager to

establish their careers.

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leaders for companies in a variety of

industries in the region.

That combination is critical to attract and keep the growing ranks of young professionals, those people committed to improving the quality of life in greater Bangor and represented by FusionBangor, the 5-year-old association that fosters that network. Members employed in education, finance, health care, hospitality, manufacturing, retail, small business and tourism report growth, sustainability and opportunity.

For instance, higher education in the Bangor region is on the cutting edge of business innovation. The University of Maine is well integrated into the business community and helps young entrepreneurs grow ideas into functioning businesses that benefit the community. *Planned Magazine*, a semi-monthly publication dedicated to Maine arts and culture, grew out of a class project at the University of Maine. The publishers' goal is to expose readers to the cultural significance of Maine life including its great outdoors, creativity and do-it-yourself attitude. Foster Innovation Center staff has worked with founders Travis Bourassa and Sean Collinson, who produce by hand 150-200 issues twice a month. The innovation center has helped these students by offering production and office space, and assistance developing a plan to secure advertising to bring the magazine to the next level.

Husson University has long supported outstanding business and nursing programs, and recently expanded to include a pharmacy school. Eastern Maine Community College trains students in trades

and fields that are important to the vitality of small business and manufacturing alike.

Each of these higher education institutions support programs and initiatives that allow area professionals to grow and thrive. Husson University is the exclusive sponsor of Fusion Noontime Networks, a monthly networking lunch that features a different community speaker and connects community members to nonprofit organizations and volunteer opportunities. Beal College recently sponsored a work force development seminar for Bangor area employers planned by members of the Bangor Region Leadership Institute class of 2009.

Bangor also has an active creative economy sector; festivals and community centered events offer a social and economic boost to the community at the same time. The 4th Annual American Folk Festival brought musical acts, cultural experiences and food to the Bangor waterfront last summer, and the fifth kicks off Aug. 28. A recent creative initiative that has helped to stimulate downtown eateries is "Bangor Lunch Mob," a Facebook group created by Gibran Graham that encourages its 756 members to attend a different eatery for lunch each week. The venue is a mystery until Graham sends out a message with the day and location. Since February 2009, the Lunch Mob has visited over 20 downtown eateries. While there is no formal data at this time, several Lunch Mob restaurants report seeing new faces amongst the regulars on Lunch Mob days.

The support network within the business community is an asset to young professionals. Many employers support the professional development of staff by sending them to local seminars and networking events as well as supporting employee community involvement and volunteerism.

FusionBangor provides professional development and networking opportunities for the community at large. While focused on the professionals between 20 and 40 years old, its relationship with the Bangor Region Chamber of Commerce allows networking with established business leaders that results in opportunities for both, especially through community service, board membership and mentoring. As a result, the boards of the Bangor Y, Local Workforce Investment Board, Penobscot Theatre and United Way of Eastern Maine Campaign Cabinet have grown. Additionally, the FusionCorps initiative—a partnership with Penobscot County Job Corps—provided over 100 businesses the opportunity to host a Job Corps participant for a day. This allowed businesses to give back to the community while mentoring young adults establishing their careers.

Fusion promotes young people in Bangor who are skilled, have college degrees and are ambitious. Members show promise as strong leaders for companies in a variety of industries in the region. In addition to being talented, bright and innovative, this group knows that drawing from collective resources benefits businesses throughout the region. ■



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