

A Population Growth Strategy for Bangor

Discussion Paper

By Ben Sprague
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Introduction

The year was 1867. The new Governor of Maine stood before the Legislature and worked his way through the usual issues of an inaugural address. Touching on the role of government, the importance of education, concerns about the state budget, pension obligations, and a litany of other challenges Maine's elected leaders would face in the coming year, the governor closed with a warning:

"Nothing is more obvious than that Maine has not developed her resources fast and far enough to afford a field for the vigorous and enterprising spirit of her sons, and hence they go forth, drawn by more inviting prospects abroad, and impelled perhaps by that restless energy of soul which has made the world what it is. The world is doubtless a gainer by this diffusion of energy and intelligence: but it is doubtful whether the state can longer afford to be a mere nursery for the missionaries of civilization"

The governor's name was Joshua Chamberlain, just recently returned from leading the 20th Maine Volunteer Infantry Regiment during the Civil War, and his words ring as true today as they did back then.

Today's Challenges

Nearly 150 years later, Maine is still struggling with the same challenges that Governor Chamberlain outlined as he began his term. Maine currently has the oldest median age of any state in the country at 43.5 years. From July 2012 to July 2013, Maine was one of just two states to report negative population growth.¹

A 2013 report by State Economist Amanda Rector projects that only four counties in Maine will see a population increase between 2010 and 2015: Androscoggin, Cumberland, Knox, and York. For Bangor specifically, Rector projects the population in 2020 to be 32,978, which is fewer than the 2010 population of 33,020. By comparison in 1990 the population of Bangor was 34,680, so we are already in the midst of a population decline or at least stagnation.

With 29.4% of Maine's population belonging to the Baby Boom generation (those born between 1946-1964), our demographic challenges are only going to become more severe. As consumers, Baby Boomers have fueled the state economically. As parents, their children have

¹ The other was West Virginia.

filled our schools. As workers, their incomes have provided the personal income tax revenues on which our state depends.

But now these Baby Boomers are retiring. Due to an economic slump and a sluggish recovery, they are not spending as much as they once did. Facing a lack of opportunity and a lethargic economic climate, the children of Baby Boomers are moving away and have little incentive to return. With our state still reeling from the twin punches of globalization and an IT revolution that has left much of Maine behind, the incomes of many Mainers have been stagnant or even dropped during the last ten years.

Without a strong intervention to grow Maine's population, there is no doubt that we will face significant budgetary challenges as the population ages. Young, healthy workers will not be available to staff potential business growth. Demand for homes will decrease and in turn put negative pressure on home values. Schools will lose students and communities may be forced to make painful choices associated with consolidation. Rural hospitals will struggle to remain financially viable in geographic areas with a declining number of people. Older Mainers will put increasing strains on the state's health and human services budget and there will be an insufficient working population to support this demand. With less income tax revenue from fewer workers and less sales tax revenue from dampened consumer activity, our state's already thin coffers will be decimated at exactly the worst possible time: when demand for retiree healthcare hits its peak and as our state's increasingly aging infrastructure punches literal and figurative holes in the state and its budget.

Action Steps

The problem of reversing population decline is one that will take thought and effort from people all over the state. Unfortunately with partisan gridlock hampering the ability for those in Augusta to accomplish much of anything and a collective over-reliance on short-term fixes to larger structural challenges, it is likely that real solutions will have to come from outside of the state's capital.

University of Southern Maine Economist Charles Colgan has stated that it is not just that we need to retain our young people, but also that we need to draw people from away. Colgan argues that Maine must attract at least 3,000 new residents every year for the next 20 years in order to sustain our workforce.

To both attract new residents and retain the ones we have, a statewide conversation and action plan is necessary that includes businesses and workers alike, residents young and old, municipal leaders, and members from regional entities like the state's Chambers of

Commerce, Mobilize Maine, and others. At the same time, individual communities need to take strong local actions.

The scope of this paper is to propose solutions for the greater Bangor region, which finds itself as the economic, cultural, and social hub for a vast geographic area stretching to the west, north, and east. No doubt the economic viability of many communities depends on the success of Bangor in the coming years. The size of Bangor, its role in the regional economy, and its many positive assets provide an excellent opportunity to engage in real plans to grow our population and along with it our economic base.

Proposed Solutions

The following is a list of actionable tasks that the City of Bangor can implement through its own efforts or through openly and actively supporting existing work already being done.² The purpose in proposing them is to put forth an agenda that we can refer to over the coming weeks, months, and years.

The time-frame for accomplishing significant progress on each task is two years and it is the hope that municipal leaders will return to them in February 2016 with a follow up report tracking successes, areas of inaction, and continuing challenges.

A. Recruitment and Retention of Businesses and Jobs

- 1) Develop our technology infrastructure with a focus on expanded high-speed internet
- 2) Create “how-to” guide for starting a business in Bangor
- 3) Expand and promote the “Bangor Ambassador” program³
- 4) Cooperate with regional entities on a positive Bangor brand
- 5) Launch business recruitment missions beyond Maine
- 6) Seek and grow connections between Bangor, Mt. Desert Island, Baxter, and Moosehead regions
- 7) Create a “Why Bangor” video or video series
- 8) Support workforce development initiatives especially technology training

B. Increasing support for relocation

- 9) Create an enhanced grant program for home rehab in CDBG-eligible neighborhoods for first-time homebuyers⁴

² For purposes of discussion, the term “City of Bangor” refers to municipal staff, the City Council, and the various citizen boards and committees that comprise municipal government.

³ <http://www.mobilizeeasternmaine.com/page/949-695/bangor-region-ambassador-program>

- 10) Provide partial property-tax rebates for first time homebuyers
- 11) Develop an easy-to-search list of city-owned residential properties for sale
- 12) Develop orientation and welcome materials for new residents and a web-based “navigator” to help new residents learn about Bangor
- 13) Develop family support team through the Ambassador program
- 14) Provide a “virtual tour” of Bangor available online
- 15) Provide a “virtual tour” of Bangor School Department available online
- 16) Be supportive and welcoming of people “from away” and open to new ideas

C. Promote social lifestyle, cultural diversity, and entertainment

- 17) Perform SWOT analysis (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) of Bangor’s cultural assets/efforts and present to the full Council and public with recommendations
- 18) Develop a ten-year plan for Downtown Bangor, Waterfront, and the Main Street Corridor and present to the full Council and public with recommendations.
- 19) Maintain municipal support of the Cultural Commission
- 20) Support Bangor School Department efforts to create a Fine Arts Academy
- 21) Support development of food infrastructure to make Bangor local food haven
- 22) Develop a “Believe in Bangor” photo and video contest and use for community branding
- 23) Increase the number and scope of outdoor art projects and visually creative elements in our community
- 24) Expand system of trails and healthy walkways and other recreational activities

D. Integrating youth through linkages and engagement

- 25) Convene area youth summit to ask for feedback and suggestions on retaining youth
- 26) Support and promote internship programs between businesses/non-profits and schools
- 27) Develop a municipal internship program
- 28) Support Bangor High School’s annual “Leading Back to Bangor” event⁵
- 29) Work to link University of Maine Innovation Center efforts to Bangor
- 30) Encourage youth participation at City Council committee meetings
- 31) Expand use of social media by City and municipal officials

⁴ Community Development Block Grant money is provided by the Federal Government to be distributed by municipalities for projects that promote affordable housing, anti-poverty initiatives, and infrastructure work.

⁵ The “Leading Back to Bangor” event is hosted at Bangor High School each spring and brings local young professionals to the school to talk about their careers and opportunities to work locally with high school juniors and seniors.

- 32) Support ease of transportation between university campuses and Downtown Bangor/Waterfront/Cross Center
- 33) Support and enhance all local college/university connections to Bangor and the region
- 34) Promote a “culture of opportunity”

E. Re-Bangorization

- 35) Survey those who have left to understand reasons and what it might take to bring back
- 36) Create video testimonials from young professionals and families to be used in marketing efforts
- 37) Develop specific recruitment efforts to attract former residents
- 38) Speak with pride about the community and its people

Conclusion

On their surface, these proposals are about retaining and recruiting people to the greater Bangor area. But really the demographic challenges in which our city, region, and state finds itself are fundamentally economic challenges. The surest way to grow our population is to grow our economy. With economic growth, there will be more jobs, and with more jobs come more people and the increased energy, economic activity, and tax revenue associated with them. With more people working, there will be fewer who need government assistance and as a result fewer strains and demands on already stretched municipal and state budgets.

Certain proposals from this list can also be applied to the state. Legislative leaders should be willing to sacrificing some short term revenue from new businesses and individuals who relocate to our state in order to incentivize them to come. Even if a business is not paying businesses taxes for the first few years they are in Maine, for example, their employees will generate income tax, sales tax, excise taxes, and the general economic activity our state so desperately needs. Perhaps an income-tax rebating program for new residents would make sense, as well. For young people with student loan debt, additional help in digging out of that debt through tax credits would go a long way towards encouraging them to choose Maine even if they did not originally attend school here.

It does appear that there is increased chatter around the state about Maine’s demographic challenges. Leaders from the business community and economists and academics from our state’s institutions of higher learning are speaking out more and more. But without real action and real work on economic development efforts, talk will only get us so far.

I would welcome your thoughts, suggestions, and ideas for the greater Bangor region and for our state in general. My hope is this discussion paper contributes something to the ongoing conversation and, more importantly, stimulates real action on these serious demographic challenges. I can be reached anytime at benjamin.sprague@bangormaine.gov or at (207) 852-1405.

Acknowledgements

The purpose and structure of this paper is largely based on a similar discussion paper by the Province of New Brunswick on the same topic. Thank you to Tanya Emery, Community and Economic Development Director for the City of Bangor for bringing it to my attention, and thank you to the *Bangor Daily News* Editorial Board for writing about it. Thank you for Joshua Plourde and Jason Bird for helping brainstorm ideas.

The paper from New Brunswick can be found here:

http://www2.gnb.ca/content/dam/gnb/Departments/petlepft/PDF/PopGrowth/NBPG_Strategy_2013-18.pdf

The *Bangor Daily News* editorial on the subject can be found here:

<https://bangordailynews.com/2014/01/06/opinion/maines-population-decline-isnt-going-to-reverse-itself/>

Some of the proposed solutions are already in the works and I owe a debt of gratitude to my fellow City Councilors, the City Manager, and our talented City Staff for their work so far. I am also grateful for the work being done by Mobilize Eastern Maine, the Tri-County Workforce Investment Board, the Greater Bangor Region Chamber of Commerce, and Fusion:Bangor, for the work they are all doing to grow our population and economic base.

About the Author

Ben Sprague is the Chairman of the Bangor City Council and the incoming Chairman of the Tri-County Workforce Investment Board. Ben is also financial advisor with Means Wealth Management and lives in Bangor with his wife, Malorie, and their son, William.