

Sun Journal

The smart choice on energy

By Rob Brown , Special to the Sun Journal
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Energy costs are stifling Maine's economy and making it increasingly difficult for ordinary people to pay their bills. The greatest economic crisis since the Great Depression has greatly accelerated the economic insecurity of Maine's families, making this bad situation even worse.

In this crisis lies an opportunity to meet our energy needs in a way that costs much less, creates more jobs, reduces our impact on the environment and improves our economy for this and future generations of Mainers. Meeting our energy needs by investing in energy efficiency and renewable energy (EE&RE, as I'll call it) rather than through traditional sources costs one-third as much and creates at least four times as many jobs.

Changing directions is now a necessity, not a choice. One cannot go without heat in Maine. We need to pay for the energy to power our homes and businesses. We need to think boldly and strategically about how to improve the economy and create jobs. The question is: How do we do all of this in the most coordinated, cost-effective and sustainable manner?

In the short term, to get the pieces in place for a high-wage, high-growth, new energy economy, Maine needs aggressive, coordinated deployment of federal stimulus funds. For the long term, Maine needs an explicit commitment to develop the workforce and business capacity of the EE&RE sector. As a Sun Journal editorial said on April 28, this investment, "should not be left to chance. Whatever Maine lawmakers decide on energy should include proposals to develop a workforce to see it through."

Most EE&RE sector jobs are considered "middle-skill" jobs, which require some amount of post high-school education, but not necessarily a four-year degree. Research by The Workforce Alliance has shown these types of jobs are both primed for the greatest growth and suffer from the greatest current shortage, in Maine and the nation. A comprehensive workforce development program will allow Maine to close that gap and create good jobs in the EE&RE sector.

The Sun Journal editorial urged lawmakers to not "lose sight of one question: what should we do to make these good ideas happen? How they answer should ensure many Mainers can find, or get back to, work." Opportunity Maine recommends a three-prong strategy including pathways, partnerships and proportional investment to answer this question.

Pathways are an "earn while you learn" strategy of career ladders that provide meaningful opportunities to access education and training and encourage continuous skills-upgrading, allowing workers to move up into better and better jobs. Partnerships bring together education institutions and programs, businesses, workers, social service providers and others to develop a plan to build the workforce and business capacity of a given sector and region. Proportional investment means explicit, coordinated funding for sector-based education and training that is proportional to the size of any program.

An effective strategy must reach across federal, state and private sector funding and across educational

institutions and workplaces, to create a comprehensive response to workforce needs in a given sector. It must provide the support to make education and training opportunities meaningful to a broad range of people, and be responsive to industry needs by training people for jobs that actually exist.

This coordinated strategy has been shown to work time and again. A recent study of broadband public investment and job creation in Virginia shows communities that included an explicit workforce development strategy saw robust, sustained job growth. Regions that invested equivalent amounts, but did not include explicit support for workforce investment, saw little sustained job creation.

It is just that simple.

Opportunity Maine's new "Green Jobs, Green Savings" report provides examples of how, in state after state, effective EE&RE sector development that includes a comprehensive workforce development system resulted in the sustained creation of high-quality jobs. The report is available at www.opportunitymaine.org/greenjobs.htm.

This week the legislature is considering measures that would expand the EE&RE sector throughout the state. This is a welcome move, but an essential component of the legislature's plan must be a comprehensive workforce development strategy to get the job done and build our economy for the long haul.

In short, efficiency measures can meet a large portion of energy needs at much lower cost while creating many more jobs, but this will not happen automatically. We know we must pay for our future energy. We know we need to create jobs. Why not meet these needs in a way that costs less, makes us less susceptible to oil price shocks, puts many more people to work and improves Maine's economy?

Why not indeed?

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