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Central Maine Growth Council ready to lead regional economic growth and development: reprinted from expansionsolutionsmagazine.com; written by Monica Wilcox Charrette

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If you're a first-time visitor taking one of several exits off I-95 to explore Central Maine, what do you see as you make your way off the exit ramp? What are the things you notice that the region offers you and your family? Your business? It's this "fresh eyes" approach that excites Darryl Sterling, Central Maine Growth Council's (CMGC) new executive director, and sparks enthusiasm about what he sees.

"This area offers the wow factor," Sterling said. "Central Maine offers outstanding quality of life--culturally, recreationally, economically and educationally. Sometimes you need an outside person to bring a different perspective to the bigger picture and help move things forward."

After beginning his new responsibilities in July 2011, Sterling has taken steps to ensure the Council becomes the catalyst in contributing to the region's economic success. Central Maine Growth Council is a public-private, non-profit partnership dedicated to the collaborative economic development for Central Maine, which includes the communities of Waterville, Winslow, Oakland and Fairfield. It was founded by the Mid-Maine Chamber of Commerce in 2001 and serves as a conduit for information and resources to businesses seeking to locate or expand in the area. The Council is governed by a 13-member board of directors, of which nine are members of the local business community.

This summer, after meeting with several businesses, academic institutions, nonprofit agencies and local leaders, Sterling quickly surmised the area's potential.

"Central Maine is economically percolating and ready to pop with new and expanding companies, more jobs and training, and tremendous investment opportunities," he said.

Sterling brings to the position over 25 years of municipal, non-profit, and private sector experience in economic, community and business development. His experience spans Maine, New England and New York. He spent the last 10 years 31 miles south as Richmond, Maine's director of economic and community development. In recent years, he secured \$10 million in grant funding that produced \$50 million in private investment, created 1,000 new jobs and retained another 1,500 jobs through innovative business recruitment and retention initiatives.

Sterling said he sees three big areas for future development. The first is new business expansion, which will create additional jobs and translate into more spending of disposable income, citing First Park,

Hathaway Creative Center, Fairfield-Waterville Industrial Rd. Connector and Head of Falls projects as areas of "great potential for expansion." He also sees Waterville's Robert LaFleur Airport, with its 450 acres, two runways, two large buildings and numerous privately owned hangars, as a critical

piece to the area's economic growth.

"Not many regions can say they have a city-owned airport with extensive runway space in their community. With a cosmetic upgrade, a business plan for increased use and a marketing strategy, that project is ready to take off," he said.

The second area of development, he said, is strengthening community partnerships with educational institutions (Colby College, Thomas College and Kennebec Valley Community College) so that we are educating for our workforce needs. He also cited the importance of partnerships with all area businesses and organizations, like the Chamber, Kennebec Valley Council of Governments, Waterville Development Corp., Kennebec Valley Entrepreneurial Network, Workforce Investment Board, city and town governments and others. Working together, he explained, the Council can foster regional economic improvements and offer important integrated marketing strategies.

In looking for innovative ways to market the region, he noted that square foot for square foot, this region has more commercial and industrial companies than any other areas of the state. Sterling also added there is great potential to develop successful community energy districts, which can provide Central Maine with an advantage of providing lower cost energy for both businesses and residents.

The third focus, he said, is using the area's exceptional quality of life to its economic advantage. "There is such a line of demarcation in Maine," Sterling said. "You rarely hear about Central Maine and all its positive attributes. I was amazed to discover the layers of resources, the depth of cultural and educational opportunities and the exceptional quality of living here. "With hard work, all of these areas can lead to an exceptional life and work balance in a short time."

Already checked off his project list is the relocation of the office (formerly in city hall) to the Mid-Maine Chamber's new building on Elm St. in Waterville. He recently established a new organizational identity tagline, "Growing a Strong Regional Economy," which is displayed on the Council's new signage and in communication materials. He has met with area business leaders, attended recent city and town council meetings and is networking at service organizations and trade shows.

Additional immediate goals include reenergizing the CMGC Board and adding greater value for its members; meeting with state and federal officials to discuss economic funding opportunities; looking at labor force expansion and developing a comprehensive strategic plan and action steps for the organization.

The larger targets include recruitment of two new companies to the area and adding 50 to 100 new jobs within six months and adding 1,000 new jobs through business expansion by 2014. His vision is to make Central Maine Growth Council the economic development leader in Central Maine so that the area becomes the state's "economic hub."

"I hope to get people involved and excited so we can make it all happen."

By Monica Wilcox Charette. Reprinted from www.expansionsolutionsmagazine.com

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