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Diverse economy, workforce and natural assets position Eastern Connecticut for growth - by Tony Sheridan

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When we discuss eastern Connecticut, it is always difficult to capture its essence in a single characterization. Therein lies its strength. With a diverse landscape and growing economy, this relatively small region—only an hour across and up and down—offers urban, suburban and rural development opportunities along central transportation spines and access to global trade.

The conversation today centers on how these thriving communities, Opportunity Zones and economic drivers overlay a fabric of established businesses and innovative ventures in a desirable location to make eastern Connecticut a solid investment right now with a promising future in sight.

Shown are panelists from the NEREJ CT Summit on October 31 (from left):
Amanda Ljubicic, Chamber of Commerce of Eastern CT; Charlotte Goldblatt, Goldblatt Associates; Courtney Hendricson, CERC; and David Kooris CT Department of Economic and Community Development.

The Chamber of Commerce of Eastern Connecticut counts among its members and benefactors representatives from across the economic spectrum, serving the interests of 1,600 large industries, small businesses and nonprofit organizations. The region supports diverse industries in manufacturing, pharmaceutical research, ship building, power generation, tourism, arts, culture, hospitality, gaming and agriculture. Eastern Connecticut is home to seven institutions of higher education including Connecticut College and Mitchell College, and has 29 colleges and universities—including Yale, Brown, Wesleyan and UConn—within an hour.

Natural resources and transportation infrastructure support unique institutions and business

opportunities. A deep-water port on the Thames River accommodates a U.S. Naval Submarine Base, General Dynamics Electric Boat submarine manufacturer, the U.S. Coast Guard Academy, a ferry to Long Island and Block Island and a port for large cargo ships. There is access to rail lines, the major highway arteries I-95 and I-395, and three airports, Danielson, Windham, and Groton-New London Airport, which is approved for commercial flights.

Shown is the Chamber of Commerce of Eastern Connecticut's booth at the Connecticut Summit on October 31st at Mohegan Sun.

Employment is on the rise in eastern Connecticut. Major employer Electric Boat broke ground on a \$850 million expansion last month where the Groton shipyard will build Columbia class submarines. Recently awarded the first phase of a \$174 million contract which could total more than \$1 billion over the next five years, Electric Boat could expand its workforce to as high as 20,000 employees regionally. Marine technology company ThayerMahan recently won a \$19.4 million contract from the Office of Naval Research. The Naval and Maritime Consortium brings together representative businesses from across the industry to tap into the "blue tech" with a national presence.

Healthcare with the expansion of Yale-New Haven Health and Hartford Healthcare across the region has created opportunities for medical professionals and investment in new facilities to enhance care. Pfizer and biotech startups maintain a strong presence in the region, tapping into the highly-educated, specialized workforce.

On the horizon, a joint venture of Ørsted and Eversource plans a hub for offshore wind turbine installation based in New London, bringing hundreds of construction and long-term jobs for skilled laborers. A \$93 million investment in upgrading the State Pier to a heavy-lift port with rail access will have economic impacts for decades. Power generation at Dominion Energy's nuclear plant in Waterford and NTE Energy's coming natural gas-fire facility in Killingly offer a diverse and stable power-base for a majority of the state and a draw for specialized workforce.

The boom in employment comes with its challenges and opportunities. In a recent presentation, CT DECD deputy commissioner David Kooris called our region "phenomenally well positioned" to capitalize on the quality of life people seek today. He pointed to the anchor infrastructure of our small, historic cities and villages that offer walking access to employment, amenities, entertainment and natural places like beaches, waterfront, and woodland—all oriented around a regional transportation infrastructure of highways, rail and ferries that connect us to the rest of the state, New York City, Providence and Boston.

Opportunity Zones in the Cities of Groton, New London and Norwich three cities on the Thames River offer ground floor investment in communities positioned to grow, cultivating their natural connections to the river. Towns throughout the region have economic development organizations in place to support new businesses, nurture existing ones, and facilitate real estate development for housing or business.

Shown (from left) are: Jane Davis, and Amanda Ljubicic
both of the Chamber of Commerce of Eastern CT

Facilitating that growth are efforts coordinated behind workforce development, recruitment and retention. The Eastern Workforce Investment Board's Manufacturing Pipeline Initiative, described as "a demand-driven model," connects over 30 community partners and over 250 employer partners, including Electric Boat and members of the Eastern Advanced Manufacturing Alliance. The program has a greater than 95% job placement rate with 1,468 jobseekers placed between April 2016 and July 2019. Important for employers, the new hire training time and the attrition rate have both dropped by 50%.

That model is the basis for meeting labor market needs and skills training in healthcare, retail and business, by drawing together manufacturers, community colleges, technical high schools and the American Job Centers. Key to the success of the model is connecting employers to training programs to inform the curriculum and connect students to on-the-job training opportunities.

The Chamber began the Community Concierge program to support employers' recruitment and retention efforts by providing information about the outstanding quality of life eastern Connecticut offers. The region encompasses rural farms and shoreline towns and small cities in one of the top-ranked states for education. A major tourism destination in New England, there are venues for all types of entertainment, including two world-class casinos and resorts, historic places, museums, arts centers, farm tours, and motorsports. Mystic, Connecticut is a family favorite destination with Mystic Seaport, Mystic Aquarium and a quaint New England downtown bridging the Mystic River.

Communities across eastern Connecticut enjoy stability built over hundreds of years of history and strong sense of identity. These communities rally around schools, causes and initiatives that continually improve the quality of life in the region. Consistently strong property values in much of the region reflect the inherent value of the location, the access to natural resources and preserved land, and the commitment to services, education and local infrastructure.

Building on a solid history the region understands the value of adapting to change and maximizing opportunity. The Chamber works with a wide range of regional organizations—corporations, small businesses, financial institutions, state and local government, seCTer, Economic Development Commissions, small business development entities, local Chambers, merchants associations, Main Street programs—to bring people with innovative ideas to those with available resources; to inform the legislature on member and community needs; and to share the opportunities and assets of our region broadly.

Our robust network of organizations is envisaging and implementing initiatives that ensure the continued and elevated success of eastern Connecticut, and these coordinated efforts make the region a good investment now with a clear path to returns in the near future.

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