Cooperatives Build a Better Maine

October 2016

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Acknowledgments

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Thank you to these organizations for their major support:

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Executive Summary

We believe that cooperatively owned businesses are key to growing Maine’s future economy, reversing demographic decline, and promoting widely-shared prosperity in the state. We outline in this report the advantages of cooperatives, describe their current role in Maine, the United States, and key regions around the world, and argue that they have important advantages in promoting manufacturing and strengthening Maine’s service sector. We advance policy measures that would create a “cooperative ecosystem” in Maine.

What will Maine’s future look like?

Maine has several possible economic futures. Right now, Maine’s demographic, economic and social trends are pointing in an ominous direction. While a few areas of the state will continue to grow in population and diversity and have reasonably robust economies, a large majority of the state’s communities will most likely continue to struggle and lose population. The few communities that are growing have frequently struggled to integrate New Mainers from other regions and cultures.

Analysts that have looked at the statistics and trends have painted a picture of where we’re headed that is downright bleak. While we agree this future is possible, we offer an an alternative way forward, a path to prosperity that is both practical and revolutionary.

Our suggested path forward is practical because it builds on our existing strengths, history, culture and characteristics. It is practical, also, because it draws on economic and social policy strategies that have broad support from across the political spectrum, as well as a rich and diverse history of applications in Maine, the United States and beyond.

Yet our path is revolutionary, simply because it is so different from what is continually offered up for solutions to our problems. It is revolutionary in its faith in the ability of Maine people to take control of and improve their own future. We believe it will have a revolutionary impact on securing the future we all want.

Transforming Ownership of our Economy

This report outlines a vision of a prosperous, equitable economy where all Mainers—young and old, new and longstanding—can fulfill their needs and aspirations. The economy we envision is anchored by a robust cluster of cooperative and employee owned enterprises that help many individuals and communities create more wealth, promote entrepreneurship and innovation, and deeply root ownership locally. We explain why our vision makes sense, what it could look like, and what steps we need to take to get there.

This report asks and answers the following questions:

What is a cooperative?

A cooperative is a business that is owned and democratically controlled by its members, and operates for the benefit of its members. They are formed by groups of consumers, workers, residents, farmers, fishermen, independent businesses and others to meet common needs.

What examples do we have in Maine?

Cooperative and employee owned businesses exist throughout the state, operating in sectors such as agriculture and food production, fishing, manufacturing, retail, food service, advertising and marketing, housing, construction and engineering, banking and insurance. Throughout this report, you will find many profiles of these businesses and the impact they’ve had on their members and communities.