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## Educators, industry leaders gather to discuss skilled workforce retention



Biddeford + Saco Chamber of Commerce + Industry Executive Director Craig Pendleton and University of Maine System Chancellor James Page listen during a forum at the PeoplesChoice Credit Union in Saco on Thursday. LIZ GOTTHELF/Journal Tribune

By LIZ GOTTHELF  
Staff Writer

SACO – The question of how to retain a young, skilled workforce in Maine is often asked. The Biddeford + Saco Chamber of Commerce + Industry, as part of a workforce development effort, is connecting educators and industry leaders together to work on some answers.

University of Maine System Chancellor James Page, along with other representatives from the university system, met with local educators,

career center staff and chamber officials gathered at a forum at the PeoplesChoice Credit Union in Saco on Thursday afternoon.

Biddeford + Saco Chamber of Commerce + Industry Executive Director Craig Pendleton said about 18 months ago the chamber organized a workforce development committee.

“My goal was to try to figure out how to bring the business community and the education system together on a more regular basis,” said Pendleton. “Everywhere you go, no matter who you talk to, people are having workforce issues.”

Page said the state economist office estimates there are about 700,000 people in the state aged 25 to 64. Page said if current trend continue, in 2032 the number is estimated drop to 600,000.

“That’s a 15 percent reduction in our work force,” said Page. “And all of you know that is not just a recipe for economic stagnation, it’s a recipe for something close to disaster.”

Page said that in 2032, between 60 percent and two-thirds of the jobs in the country are going to require at an associate’s or bachelor degree. Currently just less than 40 percent of the adults in Maine have that qualification, said Page.

Page said the solution to bridge gaps in workforce is education “It’s not just education in the abstract, it’s education tied to opportunity in Maine,” he said.

Page said there needs to be engagement between community and employers to identify the needs today as well as the needs in the upcoming years.

Participants shared what they were doing to prepare young people for the workforce, including developing university programs geared to specific sectors of business, creating partnerships between high schools and colleges, and creating internship opportunities for students.

Pendleton said there is a misconception about manufacturing jobs. “We make some really cool things in Biddeford-Saco,” he said, noting local business Fiber Materials Inc. made heat shield material that was used on a NASA spacecraft.

Pendleton said there needs to be a stronger message regarding local career opportunities sent to young students to get them excited to

work at local businesses.

He said the chamber will continue to flesh out its role in bringing businesses and the education community together.

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