

Upstate New York – The Finger Lakes Partnership



In the face of increasingly critical economic conditions, leaders within New York State's Finger Lakes region are proposing to link the communities of education, workforce development, and economic development, creating an entrepreneurial, industry-driven, integrated system. The nine county Finger Lakes region is undergoing an historic restructuring. It came to depend on the success of Eastman Kodak, Xerox, and Bausch & Lomb, creating a big-company manufacturing culture that has floundered as technologies changed and global economic shifts left the region in a state of decline. This project is based on a deep commitment to creating fundamental change in the region.

The Finger Lakes Partnership has been designed and is being implemented by a strong team of business, investor, entrepreneurial, philanthropic, government, and academic leaders who share a vision to transform the Finger Lakes region into a premier place in which to innovate, one that invests in entrepreneurial operations and educates workers, empowering them to be agile, adaptable and aligned with global opportunities through an integrated system. Calling on the expertise of the Partnership founders, Finger Lakes proposes key strategies to support four project goals: 1) energize the region's entrepreneurial economy; 2) catalyze regional innovation; 3) empower workers to succeed in the global economy, and 4) build a collaborative talent development system in the region. This project will result in strategic outcomes closely aligned with DOL's objectives and robust enough to sustain its initiatives for the long-term.

The Finger Lakes region was once among America's most innovative and entrepreneurial. The decline of its large manufacturers in the last two decades is evidenced by increasing poverty and unemployment, decreasing wages, low graduation rates, and sluggish job creation. The area has responded by cultivating technology development organizations and funding services and facilities for start-ups.

Economic analysis, however, highlights an absence of integrated collaboration among regional stakeholders; this has created a barrier for transforming the Finger Lakes region into an innovative and entrepreneurial economy. A report by the U. S. Council on Competitiveness for two local organizations reinforced this conclusion: "Greater Rochester has the assets necessary to develop a strong entrepreneurial economy. Indeed, the Rochester area surpasses most regions in the U. S. on many dimensions relevant to supporting innovation and entrepreneurship. However, to date, the region has not become an entrepreneurial success story...A fundamental challenge is cultural – the region lacks a strong entrepreneurial environment."

Strategic leaders are taking action to improve that condition, driving the mission to increase the region's capacity to support talent development for sustained economic growth. There are two focal points for growing the talent in this region: 1) developing and enhancing educational strategies that support entrepreneurship and innovation at all levels, ranging from K-12 through advanced degrees, and 2) developing education and training strategies based on the competencies of targeted industry clusters – both as they exist today and as they are integrated and change into the future as a result of innovation.

Support for entrepreneurship and innovation is found from Greater Rochester Enterprise, High Tech Rochester, Infotonics Technology Center, Rochester Business Alliance, and the Cornell Agriculture and Food Tech Park. The academic community is represented by the region's leading universities, University of Rochester and Rochester Institute of Technology, and three community colleges, Finger Lakes, Monroe, and Genesee. Government partners include the City of Rochester, the County of Monroe, Empire State Development and Genesee/Finger Lakes Regional Planning Council, which represents eight rural counties and is the planning entity for the New York State-designated Economic Development District. The Workforce Investment Boards from Genesee, Livingston, Monroe, Ontario, Orleans, Seneca, Wayne, Wyoming and Yates Counties connect the initiatives to job seekers, employers and the education systems.

Led by the business community, private and public sectors formed Greater Rochester Enterprise three years ago; the community has shown it is now willing to work together in ways not possible a few years ago. The Finger Lakes Partnership is committed to creating an entrepreneurial culture and a climate for innovation by increasing worker skills, both occupational and entrepreneurial; by sharing infrastructure; and leveraging each other's strengths, all of which will amplify the region's capacity to build a stronger economy. The investment community is another key partner, represented by the Rochester Angel Network and Trillium Group, a local venture capital firm. Philanthropic support for regional job creation is given by the Rochester Area Community Foundation.

These partners are working to leverage over \$22 million from private and public sources. The funding will catalyze the region, resulting in a true integration of powerful resources, propelling the economy from a period of slow decline to one of national leadership in regional innovation and entrepreneurship.