

## Looking for ways to stop 'brain drain'

### Tier groups team up to attract, keep young professionals

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Which comes first, the jobs or the young people?

It's a chicken-and-egg scenario that has some state officials and young professionals at odds about what is needed first and most to promote economic and community revitalization in this region and the rest of New York.

Empire State Development said it is partnering with the Young Leaders Congress to attract and retain young professionals. The goal is to stem "brain drain," or the loss of young talent, by giving workers ages 20 to 34 reasons to come to the area and stay.

New York's former first lady, Silda Wall Spitzer, formed the Young Leaders Congress in January 2008 to build on the I Live New York initiative and make the state a more attractive place to live, work, raise a family and start a business. The Young Leaders Congress includes 17 people, but will expand its membership as it increases its presence across the state.

Together, ESD and the Young Leaders Congress are planning three initiatives:

- ▶ A regional jobs and internship Web portal to help attract young professionals to opportunities across New York and allow businesses to reach new audiences.

- ▶ A start-up program to help establish and grow young professional organizations in local areas by promoting collaboration among existing young professional groups.

- ▶ A grant program to provide financial support for entrepreneurship, regional marketing, civic engagement and other programs that will have a significant impact on a community's quality of life and downtown revitalization.

The Web site is expected to launch by early next year, ESD spokeswoman Katie Krawczyk said. Michael Frame, chairman of the Young Leaders Congress, said it could be earlier, within the next few months.

Teams will be created to determine the best way to address the start-up and grant programs, with the next steps in the implementation process ready for release by late summer, Krawczyk said.

"Grassroots efforts don't just automatically start," said Frame, a 30-year-old from the Syracuse area who commutes to his job as federal relations director at Binghamton University. "It will be a lot of physical outreach and working through the geographic distances and getting our name out there."

Frame said the goal is to have all three projects fully launched within the next year. The groups are still trying to figure out how much grant money will be available, though the funding will likely be in the form of matching grants.

"The brain drain issue is one that has been of serious concern for New York state, and particularly upstate, for decades," Gov. David A. Paterson said. "Young people are the backbone to any community, as the future of that community's businesses, work force, education and societal well-being lie with them. It is absolutely essential that we begin addressing this issue immediate-

ly and aggressively to end this declining movement in our state's population."

Census Bureau estimates released last summer show most Southern Tier communities continue to slowly lose population. Binghamton lost 5 percent of its population since the 2000 Census.

A smaller population often means a shrinking work force, which can hurt economic growth by making it harder for companies to fill jobs.

"Now is the time when we need to be doing these things," said Michael Fuller, a member of Young Leaders Congress and director of Pipeline 4 Progress, a 13-county regional initiative — including Broome and Tompkins — that's working to attract and retain talented people in the Southern Tier, particularly those ages 40 and under.

"If we lose that (talent), we will continue to decline and things will be a lot worse than anything we've seen before," said Fuller, a 30-year-old who grew up in upstate New York and started Fuller Group, an economic development consulting firm in Horseheads, in 2007. "At a very young age, I got involved in the area. I started volunteering in politics, the Southern Tier AIDS program, American Cancer Society. If I was some place like New York (City) ... you could get so lost in the shuffle."

There are organizations that are trying to enhance the state's business climate, he said.

"What people don't talk about enough is the people climate," Fuller said. "Companies will locate where the CEO wants to live."

Ron Lanouette, a lawyer and executive committee member of the Southern

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Kathryn Fletcher, chief executive officer of H2 Innovations Inc. in Binghamton. The 22-year-old said she always thought she'd leave the region for a career but ended up staying after seeing opportunities at home.

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Tier Young Professionals, said the state can create all the initiatives it wants. But without good-paying jobs, chances are many young people will not and cannot stay in New York.

"A lot of it is stuff they've said before," said Lanouette, 35. "They're great ideas, but let's see what happens with the execution. If there are jobs here, people will stay."

STYP, founded in 2002, aims to enrich the quality of life for young people in Greater Binghamton through social activities, networking events and civic and philanthropic ventures.

"We don't do economic. We don't try to do economic," Lanouette said.

But it seems that the state can't see the forest for the trees, he said.

"We're one of the highest taxed states," he said. "Lockheed took a hit, so we're going to take a hit. Lockheed was a big attractor of young people to this area."

Lockheed Martin in Owego, a major employer in the region, said last month it will lay off about 130 of its roughly 4,000 employees with more job cuts expected. Last week, Lockheed said it was laying off about 100 of its subcontract workers at the Owego plant.

"They have to address the economy," Lanouette said. "It's easier to address a small pocket than try to address a bigger problem."

The state should not focus just on young professionals, said Lanouette, who's from the Boston area but moved here for a job and stayed for the relatively low cost of living and slower, more friendly pace of life compared to a larger city.

"If you have an economy that hires people, you'll hire young people," Lanouette said. "If you focus on the bigger issue, you're going to take care of the target group."

Still, Kathryn Fletcher's enthusiasm for the ESD/Young Leaders Congress efforts is clear.

Fletcher, 22, grew up in Windsor,

graduated last year from Binghamton University with a bachelor's degree in bioengineering and stayed in the region when she had repeatedly told herself she wouldn't.

"I thought no way in heck I'd stay in Binghamton," she said, noting that a common perception is that there are no opportunities here. "It was instilled in my mind from day one, I'm leaving the area."

But then she got involved in various community groups and made her own opportunities — and reasons to stay.

In addition to being a member of Young Leaders Congress and executive director for Catalysts for Intellectual Capital 2020, she also is chief executive officer of H2 Innovations Inc., located at the Greater Binghamton Innovation Center, 123 Court St., Binghamton.

CIC 2020 is a student-run economic development think tank at BU that works to keep the university's graduates in the area.

H2 is a business startup launched in 2006 by three BU students. The business, which includes subsidiaries ActionAtlas and BizLife, is now made up of just Fletcher and co-founder and Chief Technology Officer Patrick Hart.

ActionAtlas offers free maps to familiarize BU students with the community. The maps highlight BC Transit and BU bus stops and business and venue locations, allowing the businesses to advertise to a target market for a "very low cost."

BizLife is a Web-based service under development to use artificial intelligence to provide users with personalized suggestions for real-time entertainment and recreational activities locally.

Fletcher said she appreciates the state's support to encourage business creation and growth.

"The potential is out there," she said. "It's just matching the opportunities and resources together."