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Pay attention to Next Generation

By Tiffany Bluemle

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As a member of the Next Generation Commission, it is exciting to see workforce development surface as one of this legislative session's key issues.

Legislation that has emerged in the House and the Senate are strikingly different in terms of who and what kinds of activities are funded, but both are solid attempts to grapple with unavoidable demographic shifts that will reduce the available pool of skilled labor in the years ahead.

We're hopeful that the debate over money doesn't eclipse some of the broader, and perhaps thornier, issues identified in the commission's report as critical to addressing serious challenges to Vermont's economic vitality.

Three points seem important to reinforce to help us avoid losing sight of the forest for the trees.

First, the commission recommended that funding appropriated for workforce development be flexible to enable the state to address the needs of all Vermonters and diverse economic development priorities. To that end, we recommended that Next Generation funds be directed to the Workforce Education and Training Fund and to Vermont Student Assistance Corp. to expand support of non-degree grants to individuals.

Workforce development activities must take different forms to address the needs of particular industries and populations; keeping the funding flexible so that it can be used to address those varied needs is absolutely critical.

We urge the Legislature to avoid creating separate grant programs within existing programs or legislatively targeting specific industries for particular support; these strategies run the risk of further partitioning training dollars, reducing the ability of state officials and training providers to respond to emerging opportunities or challenges, and constricting opportunities for many Vermont employers and individuals to participate fully in the state's economy.

Second, any new legislation ought to ensure that Vermont's workforce development, economic development, and education efforts are aligned and complementary. This can only be achieved by clearly vesting authority and accountability in a "champion," a single body or authority that can bring the state's public, private, and nonprofit players together to establish common ground and

clear priorities.

Finally, any workforce development legislation that emerges this session should be viewed as a first step towards addressing Vermont's economic and workforce development challenges.

The Next Generation Commission stressed as critical the need to find new ways to support education and training, and advocated that the state appoint a task force to explore the potential of strategies that have been used by other states to make a difference in Vermont.

It's terrific that new money is available to boost education and training initiatives next year; we were assured by many who testified last fall, however, that the amount that's currently on the table isn't enough to address either the immediate and especially the future challenges that so many have described.

If we are to act with foresight, as the speaker urged us to do in the March 15 Free Press, we must be willing to face the true dimensions of the problem -- and boldly step up to its challenge.

Tiffany Bluemle of Burlington served in the fall as a member of the Next Generation Commission.