



## **2021 Annual Conference Attendees Focus on *"Charging Ahead Together"***

Economic development organizations are experiencing a "leapfrog moment" in which leaders would do well to consider "what functional, social and emotional problems" they solve. The insight was among the ideas shared by futurist and economist Rebecca Ryan at NCEDA's Annual Conference last week. More than 200 members participated in-person at the Atlantic Beach Doubletree Hotel, with more than 50 others joining virtually. This year's conference theme was "Charging Ahead Together."

"As the pandemic hit, my phone was blowing up," Ryan told the gathering. "People are uninterested in the future when it's in a steady state, but they are when we experience a giant disruption." Ryan, who is based in Wisconsin, addressed the gathering live via video. As the world re-opens, numerous impacts from the pandemic will be permanent. "There will be some legacy here, some hanging on," she said. "We're between a sleep phase and an awake phase right now. There are so many open questions, and all of them point to the fact that things aren't yet settled."

Ryan expects the commercial real estate market will suffer from a 10% decline in demand for office space. "You have potentially a 10-year setback for commercial real estate," she said. Restaurant chains that pivoted early to take-out and delivery formats will enjoy sustained success. Among the questions the convention and meetings industry will have to navigate is whether an event's carbon footprint is worthwhile. "Periods of disruption create unbelievable opportunities for disruptors," Ryan said. "This is a leapfrog moment for you, and you have to make good use of this time."

Commerce Secretary Machel Sanders said the state had thus far seen 11,000 announced new jobs in 2021, compared to 5,500 at this time last year. Equity and inclusion would be a focus for the department moving forward, she said. "Our economy should be one that works for all people in our state," Sec. Sanders said. "That requires a bold vision for economic recovery in

the wake of this pandemic. I am confident we can get there.” Among the building blocks of a thriving economy are health care, education and infrastructure. “We can make North Carolina’s economy the envy of the world,” she said, calling on NCEDA members to continue advocating for solutions for digital equity. “You are important. Lift your voices as an economic development community.”

Danya Perry, Director of Equitable Economic Development for Wake County Economic Development, said North Carolina has “a great magnet but a poor ladder.” The rungs of the ladder once were close enough to facilitate ascent for everyone. “Today the rungs are further apart,” he said. In Wake County, impoverished youth have just a 4% chance of moving into the top 20% income quartile, Perry said. “Equity is not a social program. It’s not about welfare. It’s about full participation in the ecosystem.” Wake County worked with RTI in developing a Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) Index based on five measures: poverty rate, unemployment, vacant housing, education and the dependency ratio. “We’re at a point where we have data to inform our decision-making,” he said. “DEI is not a cost-center. It’s an investment. It gives us a competitive edge.”

In leading a vision for North Carolina’s global integration, Secretary of State Elaine Marshall dials up perspective gained in her youth as a 4H exchange student in Brazil. “The experience molded me,” Marshall said. “Exposure to different cultures is important to everything you do.” She joined NCSU’s Tom White and Peter Thornton of the NC Department of Agriculture in a panel discussion on the NC Coalition for Global Competitiveness, which was moderated by former Commerce Secretary Jim Fain. “This program aligns with EDPNC and Commerce to optimize North Carolina’s global engagement,” Fain said. The effort is the result of collaboration among 60 individuals hoping to maximize the state’s overseas potential. “There’s plenty of room for others to get involved,” he added. Visit [www.GoglobalNC.org](http://www.GoglobalNC.org) to learn more.

The two-day event featured case studies on several recent marquee wins. Tom Sri, Associate Director of Government Relations at Raytheon Technologies (Pratt & Whitney’s parent company), told NCEDA members that Pratt & Whitney’s current project was about a transformation of their company over generations. The company will build 1.2 million square-feet of production space for its new turban airfoils, which will improve aviation fuel efficiency by 16% and result in less engine noise and thus more flexible air routes. “Our vision is to be a member of the community,” Sri said. “In Biltmore Farms we knew we had a partner.” Members also learned about the arrival of Centene Corp. in Charlotte, Bharat Forge in Lee County and Nestlé Purina in Rockingham County, as well as efforts to redevelop the hurricane-ravaged town of Fair Bluff.

EDPNC President Chris Chung said, “tourism by far remains the area that still has a long way to go to recover from the pandemic, and it’s being complicated by labor shortages.” Global trade had also suffered due to the absence of in-person global marketing events. Travel restrictions had similarly complicated the site selection process for international firms considering US locations. “It’s been harder for foreign companies to do their due diligence on new locations without being able to travel,” Chung said. One area of encouragement was in small business start-up activity as measured by calls to BLNC. “That says something about the resiliency of North Carolinians.” The state is back to pre-pandemic levels in our project pipeline,” Chung reported. “With numerous mega projects, there are transformational opportunities to change the trajectory of a community for years to come,” he continued. “We’re at an historic high with the number of those types of projects.”

Duke Energy CEO Lynn Good said companies increasingly seek solutions that lower their carbon footprints and meet corporate sustainability goals. “Many see the push toward a low-carbon future not as a trend – but as a permanent shift that requires action today,” Good said in a virtual address to the conference. “That’s why sustainability and the reduction of carbon emissions are so closely tied to our state’s success.” North Carolina has been at the forefront on this issue, ranking third in the nation for solar capacity, for example. “At Duke Energy, our business strategy is our climate strategy, and we’ve set an ambitious goal of at least 50% carbon reduction by 2030 and net-zero by 2050.” Good called economic development “the ultimate team sport,” and spoke of the partnership Duke maintains with economic development organizations across the state. “For us, that starts with site readiness – because in economic development, you’re only as good as the product you’re selling,” Good told NCEDA members.