

Welcome!

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MxG Shared Materials and Meeting Notes can be found [here](#)

Please paste any announcements re events or activities at the [bottom of this document](#).

Welcome!

What is MxG? Maine Accelerates Growth (MxG) is a statewide network of organizations and individuals that support entrepreneurs and innovators to scale in Maine and beyond. We believe that a vibrant, inclusive innovation and entrepreneurial ecosystem will result in a more abundant, equitable, and sustainable economy and make Maine a great place to live, work and play.

We work together to share expertise, seek best practices, and to address system gaps. We promote the successes of Maine startups and entrepreneur support organizations (ESOs), and collaborate to attract talent and inspire innovation.

Our values are to be inclusive, action-oriented, and metric-focused. We think long-term and system-wide, and seek ways to be more collaborative.

Our monthly meetings highlight the activities of Maine Technology Institute, the Maine Department of Economic and Community Development, organizations that support startups, and startups in Maine.

By “**Entrepreneurial and Innovation Ecosystem**” we mean a system of cultural, financial, technical, policy, and relationship networks that can support innovation-driven enterprises (IDEs): entrepreneurs and innovators with ideas & technologies that have the potential to spread, scale, and change life in positive ways for large numbers of people.

MxG is a project of MTI.

Agenda

10:55 Small Networking Groups

11:05 Welcome and MTI Updates

11:10 Eric Weidman, [Department of Economic and Community Development](#)

11:15 Chris Bunnell, [UniteGPS](#)

11:25 Eliah Thanhauser, [North Spore](#)

11:35 Karen West, Susan Ruhlin, Suzanne Hamlin, Update on Federal Funding Programs (SBIR/STTR) and [FAST Resource Center](#)

11:55 Community Announcements

Meeting Notes

Notes are a contemporaneous capture of main points, and available to all participants and non-participants for corrections and additions. Presenters are invited to provide links to supplemental info (registration links, pitch deck url, contact info, etc.) for follow up. Help MxG thrive by adding to our shared meeting notes!

Attendees: Tom Kittredge, Anthony Durante, Ariadne Dimoula, Taylor Boucher, Eliah Thanhauser, Christopher Bunnell, Trevor, Lisa Liberatore, Eric Weidman, Emmalee Hall, Martin Grohman, Winnery Kazaka, Jack Wilson, Garvan Donegan, Jen Sporzynski, Cindy Talbot, Steven Eaton, Peter Piconi, Karen West, Emma Richardson, Harshakalai Kumar, Paul Fitzpatrick, Kim Xiao, and Zach Porras, Mihir Kulkarni, Hangliang Ren, Kevin Patrick McDonovan, Savani Mengawade, Joe Powers, Rachel Rathburn, Joe Migliaccio, and Emily Braley.

MTI Update

Tom Kittredge, Senior Investment Officer/MxG Manager
tkittredge@mainetechnology.org

PRESENTER: Tom Kittredge, [Maine Technology Institute](#)

[Innovation Ecosystem Development Program](#)

- ****Application Status:****Still open.
- ****Deadline:****Closes at 5 p.m. on July 1, 2025.
- ****Eligibility:****Primarily for ecosystem partners, including non-profits and research institutions. For-profit entities may be eligible if they focus on providing support to entrepreneurs.
- ****Purpose:****To fund organizations running programs aligned with MTI's mission, aiming to increase MTI's deal flow by fostering new companies in Maine or helping existing ones scale.
- ****Information:****Details available on the MTI website under "explore funding programs" > "innovation ecosystem development" dropdown.

PRESENTER: Eric Weidman, [Department of Economic and Community Development](#)

[Maine-2025 Award Summary.pdf](#)

[Grants and Opportunities | Northern Border Regional Commission](#)

- ****Statewide Opportunities:****Growing interest in heritage industries, new initiatives in timber and forest products, life sciences, and marine-related sectors. More details on new state-level initiatives are expected in the next one to two months.
- ****Economic Development Council of Maine:****Annual meeting scheduled for June 27, 2025, focusing on economic development strategy and domestic trade opportunities. Registration is still open.
- Northern Border Regional Commission (NBRC) Grant Program:
 - ****Overview:****A federal program distributing funds to the New England region.
 - Previous Funding Round (one of two annually):
 - ****Applications:****38 submitted.
 - ****Awards:****25 grants awarded.
 - Total Funding:\$13,679,000.
 - ****Focus Areas:****Infrastructure, workforce development, and economic projects that involve a municipality or non-profit. Businesses can connect with their municipality for application opportunities.
 - Examples of Awards:
 - ****Aroostook County (Presque Isle):****Received a \$1,000,000 grant towards a total project of over \$5,000,000 for the replacement of water mains and hydrants.
 - ****Hantau (Bar Harbor Campus):****Awarded \$1,000,000 for renovations to their Bar Harbor campus, supporting medical facility infrastructure.

- ****Common Thread:****Significant awards for workforce development, including pre-apprenticeship, apprenticeship, and generalized workforce development programs statewide, addressing the demand for employees.

Upcoming Funding:

- ****Fall Funding Round Applications:****Due in August.
- Catalyst Program:\$11,000,000 available.
- Forest Economy Funds:\$5,000,000 available.
- Timber for Transit Program:\$15,000,000 available.

PRESENTER: Chris Bunnell, [UniteGPS](#)

christopher.bunnell@unitegps.com (207) 671-6293

Company Overview

- Business Model:****Software-as-a-Service (SaaS)** solution focused on student transportation.
- Market Reach:****Serves more than 50 school districts across the country.**
- Core Features:****Includes GPS tracking, routing optimization, turn-by-turn navigation on tablets, and student swipe card functionality for bus entry/exit.**
- Competitive Landscape:****Operates in a highly competitive market with seven competitors, all perceived as homogeneous by clients.**
- Strategic Goal (Decision):****Aiming to "leap significantly forward," be "ten times better," and achieve a "winner-take-all" position through the integration of Artificial Intelligence (AI).**
- AI Development (Collaboration):****Partnered with the folks at MTI for significant assistance in developing AI tools.**
- Upcoming Investment:****Planning to invest "quite a lot of money" next month for client demonstrations nationwide, making this presentation the first public viewing of their new AI tools.**
- Team Composition:****Comprises a team of about 12 people, primarily based in South Portland, with additional members in California and Washington. The team includes several members from the Rioux Institute Northeast.**

AI-Powered Product Demonstrations

Voice Command Navigation & Database Management

Voice-activated commands via a "key mic" enable users to navigate the system and manage data hands-free, designed for busy office environments.

System Navigation (Examples):

- "Please take me to the fleet view page" (opens GPS view).
- "Take me to the route create" (moves to the route creation page).
- "Open a new tab" (opens a new tab within the current page).

On-Page Actions & Database Editing (Examples):

- "Open up the student profile for Derek Collins" (instantly displays the student's profile).
- This feature saves "four or five seconds per student" per action, which is a "massive leap" given users may perform this "hundreds of times" when making adjustments or interpreting plans.
- Profile Details (Data):**Student profiles include contact information, address, assigned route, and details on accommodations for special needs.
- **Database Modification (Examples):**
- "Add a contact to the student Mary Collins, the student's mother; her phone number is 207-671-8143 and her email address is gmail.com" (system parses and integrates the information).
- "Add an address for Derek Collins at 51 Cragmere Avenue" (system pulls up a dialog box, inputs information, and requests verification before saving).
- "This student needs a wheelchair lift. Please modify the profile accordingly" (system checks off the relevant option, confirms, and saves).
- Future Capabilities:**Plans include enabling users to create routes, add students to stops, and perform "pretty much anything" in the system using voice commands.

Automated Workflow for Student Onboarding

- Feature (Explanation):**A workflow automation tool designed to significantly reduce the time districts spend adding new students.

Process Flow (Explanation):

- When a parent registers a new student, core data (student name, grade, address, parent information) automatically flows into the system via a data feed.
- The system then automates the process of determining transportation eligibility and initiating contact with parents via email.

Email Conversation Example (Ethan Cotter):

- The system identifies Ethan Cotter as a new student and drafts an email to the parent (Robert).

Email Content (Data/Questions):

- "Does Ethan need transportation? Yes or no" (identifies potential cost savings for the district).
- If yes, "Do they need it in the morning, the evening, or both?"
- "Does Ethan have any special transportation?"

****Route Planning (Explanation):****The system proactively "took the liberty to start to plan out a route" based on the student's potential transportation needs.

****Approval Process (Decision):****The drafted email is presented to the transportation director for sign-off (can be set to "autopilot" for automatic sending).

****Parent Response & System Processing (Example):****A simulated parent response states, "child needs transportation only in the morning because my wife will pick up my child in the after period. My child does not have any special needs." The system processes this, assigns the student to the morning route only, and sends a confirmation email to the parent.

Discussion & Q&A Highlights

- ****Historical Context (Explanation):****A participant (Jack) highlighted the significant evolution from 30 years ago (when he drove a school bus with no visibility) to today's "complete visibility" for parents and administrators.
- ****Impact of Technology (Explanation):****The technology is gaining "so much traction" because AI is profoundly impacting the visibility administrators and parents have regarding student transportation, moving beyond traditional Excel file management.
- ****Route Tracking Capability (Agreement):****The system tracks "any transportation," including regular routes, special programs, field trips, and technical school commutes, encompassing the "whole diversity of anything that moves a child with a school bus."
- ****Development Focus:****The company prioritizes building tools around high-frequency tasks first, with plans to eventually handle "any little item that's on the docket."
- ****Team Quality:****The team was praised as "awesome," comprising young professionals, including recent graduates from Rioux Institute and a new member from Carnegie Mellon.

PRESENTER: Eliah Thanhauser, [North Spore](#)

Eliah@northspore.com

Company Overview

- **Founding & History:** Started in 2014 as a small mushroom farm.
- **Unique Approach (Term):** From inception, they "always created our own mushroom genetics," differentiating themselves from most mushroom farms that purchase spawn, making them "incredibly vertically integrated."
- **Market Identification:** Early on, identified a significant market for mushroom growing supplies for both commercial farms and individual hobbyists.
- **Market Influence:** Has played a substantial role in increasing awareness of mushroom cultivation through extensive online content (blogs, YouTube channel, events), with content widely used nationally and internationally.

Current Market Position (2024):

- **Revenue (Data):** Achieved \$16.5 million in revenue.
- **Funding Status (Decision):** Entirely bootstrapped since its start with \$10,000 in initial capital, this marks their "first equity raise ever." They have received support from MTI but have not had equity investors until now.
- **Market Leadership (Term):** Recognized as the "leading e-commerce brand for mushroom growing nationally."
- **Vertical Integration (Explanation):** Maintains complete vertical integration, handling all aspects from initial culture work and genetics in their own facility to manufacturing, R&D, packaging, and fulfillment, all based in Portland, Maine.
- **Workforce (Data):** Employs 75 people.
- **Facilities (Data):** Operates a 25,000 square foot warehouse.
- **Equity Structure:** The three founders currently retain 100% equity in the company prior to this equity raise.

Market Segments & Product Lines

Customer Categories

- **Wellness (Term):** Customers seeking medicinal mushrooms for health and wellness.

- **Products (Examples):** A full wellness line including mushroom chocolate (made in collaboration with Bixby Chocolate in Rockland), a supplement line, a tincture line, and a new mushroom coffee.
- **Shroomer (Term):** Mushroom-centric individuals who are knowledgeable about products and often perform their own lab work.
- **Products (Examples):** Growing materials, automated grow chambers for indoor cultivation, and lab supplies. This category includes customers ranging from small farms to hobbyists.
- **Mushroom Gardener (Term):** Individuals who are primarily gardeners but are interested in or learning about growing mushrooms.
- **Market Opportunity (Explanation):** This represents a "huge market" opportunity, as mushroom gardening is seen as a natural extension of traditional flower gardening.

Innovation & Brand Leadership

Brand Recognition (Term): North Spore has become the "Kleenex of mushroom growing," with their brand name often used generically for their innovative products.

Intellectual Property (Data): Holds numerous trademarks and patents (with several pending) covering a range of innovations, including growing substrates, automated chambers, and various lab supplies.

State-of-the-Art Facility (Explanation): Their Portland facility features a lab with six clean rooms, all equipped with HEPA filtered air, making it a "leading facility in the country." The facility also handles substrate mixing and fulfillment.

Growth Strategy & Financial Outlook

Content & Customer Engagement

Strategic Importance (Explanation): Content creation is a "huge part of our brand" as it addresses the primary obstacle of adoption: lack of knowledge and access to supplies for mushroom growing.

Benefits of Mushroom Gardening (Explanation): Mushrooms offer significant benefits for gardening, including improved soil health, enhanced bioavailability of nutrients, better moisture retention, and pest control.

Content Reach (Data): Their YouTube channel has garnered over 25 million views, with 20% of their traffic being organic from YouTube.

****Customer Loyalty (Explanation):****Customers exhibit high loyalty, described as "sticky," returning for repeat purchases, spending more, and referring others.

Market Opportunities & Projections

Major Markets (Data):

- ****Mushroom Growing Supplies:****Currently their main market, though it is the smallest of the three identified.
- ****Lawn & Garden (Opportunity):****A "huge opportunity" exists to establish a dedicated "mushroom section" in garden centers and hardware stores, a segment currently underserved. North Spore aims to be the brand to lead this expansion.
- ****Medicinal Market (Opportunity):****Anticipates "heavily expanding" into this segment.
- ****Future Projections (5 years):****Anticipates significant growth by developing new revenue streams, including monetizing their media content, expanding into lawn and garden retail, increasing indoor cultivation, and growing their medicinal market presence.
- ****Revenue Growth (Data):****A notable jump from \$9.3 million to \$16.5 million in 12 months was attributed to the completion and utilization of their new facility (built from 2020 to 2022), which increased capacity and efficiency, as well as meeting pent-up demand.

Equity Raise & Leadership Expansion

****New Leadership (Decision):****Recently brought on Alex Strub and Ben Chesler, both formerly of Imperfect Foods. Ben Chesler, a co-founder of Imperfect Foods who grew the company to over \$600 million in annual revenue before its exit, is taking over as CEO.

****Founder's Role (Decision):****The current presenter (Elia) will transition to focusing more on operations.

Fundraising Details (Data):

- ****Pre-money Valuation (Data):****Targeting a \$20 million pre-money valuation.
- ****Lead Investor (Agreement):****Has secured a lead investor and a signed term sheet.
- ****Soft Circled (Data):****Approximately \$2.3 million has been soft circled.
- ****Remaining Target (Data):****Approximately \$700,000 still needs to be raised.

PRESENTER: Garvan Donegan, Emmalee Hall, Karen West, Susan Ruhlin, Suzanne Hamlin, Update on Federal Funding Programs (SBIR/STTR) and [FAST Resource Center](#)

Garvan.gdonegan@centralmaine.org 207-272-2243

- Garvan presented an overview of the [Central Maine Growth Council](#)
- CMGC operates in partnership with municipalities, businesses, academic institutions, and cultural organizations to bolster quality of life and economic vitality .
- [Resources](#) that the Central Maine Growth Council has available to Entrepreneurs and Startups were discussed.
- A key differentiator of the Central Maine Growth Council (CMGC) is the unique alignment of community, philanthropy, and venture support, which creates an environment that's unusually supportive of innovation for a rural region.

Community-Driven Philanthropy

- Local Foundations and Institutions like the Alford Foundation, Colby College, and community banks actively fund revitalization efforts, tech infrastructure, and entrepreneurship.
- This culture of giving extends beyond charity — it's strategic investment in long-term economic resilience (e.g., downtown Waterville redevelopment, arts and culture integration).

Supportive Venture Ecosystem

- CMGC helped establish Dirigo Labs, a startup accelerator backed not just by government grants, but by local angel investors, regional venture capital, and institutional partners (like Maine Venture Fund).
- Unlike many small cities, Central Maine has cultivated a startup pipeline that's connected to real capital and mentorship — including SBIR/STTR coaching and federal grant navigation.

Public–Private Trust

- The council has built trust among municipalities, private enterprises, and philanthropic leaders, enabling fast, aligned responses (e.g., COVID-era relief funds, rapid deployment of recovery dollars).
- Local leadership sees economic development as a community mission, not just a business function.
- Leverages philanthropy to seed transformative projects
- Fosters an entrepreneurial mindset across sectors

- Creates a shared identity around innovation and community growth
- Dirigo Labs incubator is open right now.
- Support conditions of when a tax program is realized.
- Mufaddal Ali – Project Management Specialist, Dirigo Labs
- Nicole Timmins transitioned CMGC to a 501c3 non-profit.
- Emmalee is program lead on SBIR unique skillset. Has been with Dirigo Labs since its inception.
- Link to register for July 9 Intro to SBIR workshop:

<https://www.eventbrite.com/e/2025-federal-funding-summit-tickets-1402322888509>

FEDERAL FUNDING SUMMIT

An Introduction to SBIR/STTR Programs for Small Business Innovation

Join Maine's innovation ecosystem for a fast-paced, half-day event designed to help startups and small businesses access SBIR/STTR funding and build connections with academic researchers, government agencies, and fellow entrepreneurs.

✓

WHAT YOU'LL LEARN

- HOW TO IDENTIFY THE RIGHT SBIR/STTR OPPORTUNITY FOR YOUR TECHNOLOGY OR IDEA
- HOW TO CONNECT WITH RESEARCH PARTNERS AT UMAINE AND THE ROUX INSTITUTE
- HOW TO CRAFT A COMPELLING CAPABILITY STATEMENT TO REACH FEDERAL BUYERS
- WHAT FEDERAL AGENCIES LIKE NSF AND NAVSEA ARE LOOKING FOR IN PROPOSALS
- LESSONS LEARNED FROM MAINE COMPANIES THAT HAVE SUCCESSFULLY SECURED SBIR AWARDS

✓

FEATURED SPEAKERS AND PANELISTS

EXPERTS FROM MTI, UMAINE, ROUX INSTITUTE, APEX ACCELERATOR, NSF AND NAVSEA SBIR-FUNDED ENTREPRENEURS FROM VIABLE GEAR AND BLUSHIFT AEROSPACE



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TO REGISTER



Visit: <https://tinyurl.com/594bs85j>

Includes: Coffee, snacks, and dedicated networking time

 TechPlace – Brunswick Landing
74 Orion St, Brunswick ME

 Wednesday, July 9

 8:30 AM – 12:30 PM

SPONSORED BY



You can make it here.

Events & Announcements

Job at UMaine

<https://umaine.edu/hr/employment-university-maine/>

Maine Angels Calendar

has links to ecosystem events and also to opportunities for Founders:

<https://tinyurl.com/y4ejet3t>

Please feel free to connect on LinkedIn and share events for the “of interest” calendar. Bobbie Silber Lamont

Downeast Innovation Network

If you are interested in being on the mailing list for Downeast Innovation Network (DEIN) please email Sarah Strickland at sbs4940@gmail.com

Maine Funding Network

One stop shop for businesses looking for funding. Maine Funding Network is looking

<https://www.maineftundingnetwork.com/>

SCEC - Partners in Entrepreneurship - Machias - Spring 2025

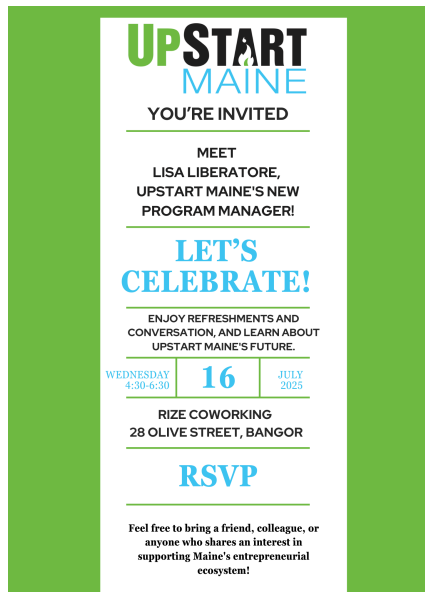
<https://mainestreetbusiness.org/pathways-beyond-the-business-plan/>

The **Maine Science Festival** has kicked off! Full program available at <https://www.mainesiencefestival.org/2025program>; MTI is the sponsor for our Headliner Event, 5 Minute Genius™ (<https://www.mainesiencefestival.org/5-minute-genius>). All events available free of charge to attendees, thanks to our sponsors. We have some start-up folks involved in a number of programs, including Brian Harris from MedRhythms at Science on Tap tonight and Asheesh Lanba at 5 Minute Genius on Saturday at 7pm, The Gracie Theater.

www.flexiblecapitalfund.com

www.nnewin.org

<https://www.startupmaine.org/program/>



<https://www.eventbrite.com/e/the-upstart-meetup-tickets-1411107112359?aff=oddtcreator>

Come to the Grantx Launch party at the Abromson Center on USM's Portland Campus.

There will be food/drinks and some exciting announcements as well as a few guest speakers and a pitch competition.

<https://grantx.com/launch-event>

Next MxG Meeting: Thursday, July 17, 2025 at 11am.

There will be no MXG meeting in August 2025.

Evergreen Zoom link for MxG Meetings

Join Zoom Meeting

<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/88513647732?pwd=RTFSMmh1Qzh5LzF5MVVDMG42VXdFZz09>

Meeting ID: 885 1364 7732

Passcode: 141648