

Politics and the City: Ambassador visits Worcester with hopes of teaming up the region's, Ghana's economies

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WORCESTER — Health care careers. Transportation infrastructure. Higher education opportunities, particularly in science, technology, engineering and mathematics.

The Central Massachusetts and Ghanaian economies are looking to grow in similar directions.

And Hajia Alima Mahama, Ghana's first female ambassador to the United States, told state, city and local officials, business, civic and higher education chiefs, and leaders of the city's Ghanaian community Friday that the two economies should team up.

"We want to continue to build relationships," Mahama said. "And doing it through the private sector is very important."

Mahama visited the Worcester Regional Chamber of Commerce on Main Street for lunch Friday as part of her three-day visit to the city, which she and other leaders said was home of the largest concentration of Ghanaians per capita in the U.S. with 38,000 residents. Ghana, located in West Africa, has a population of roughly 32,000,000.

Her visit began Thursday and culminates Saturday with a town meeting for the local Ghanaian community.

On the agenda Friday: establishing and improving economic ties between the West African nation and the city and region.

“It is in our interest to strengthen ties in every sector, and this meeting and several meetings over the next couple of days will help solidify that,” Chamber President and CEO Tim Murray said after the meeting. “(The Ghanaian community) is a big part of the economy of the city and region, and it will only grow as the population grows.”

Lt. Gov. Karyn Polito agreed.

“This is an opportunity to do more for Ghana, for Massachusetts and for Central Massachusetts,” Polito said, who described the roughly 50,000 Ghanaians in Central Massachusetts as a valuable part of the region's economy and culture.

“We need you,” Polito continued. “We need people with the skills and abilities to fill the jobs that are growing in Central Massachusetts.”

Growing Ghana's economy at home

Meanwhile, Mahama said she is looking to grow Ghana's economic profile back home. An embassy video branded the nation as the “Gateway to Africa” for European and American companies looking to the continent.

“Ghana is full of optimism and open for business,” the video proclaimed.

And while much of the Ghanaian economy is currently centered on its extensive coal and oil reserves and cocoa farming, the video emphasized that transitioning and diversifying its economy is a major goal of the Ghanaian government.

Many of the ways it would like to do so may sound familiar to Central Massachusetts residents.

Mahama repeatedly stressed the importance of education and health care in not just providing necessary services for a thriving population, but in also providing economic growth.

Several times she suggested an exchange program among local universities in Ghana and those in the Worcester area, and representatives of Worcester State University, Worcester Polytechnic Institute and Quinsigamond Community College were among the attendees at the lunch.

Meanwhile, Lewis Evangelidis may have guessed correctly when he joked that he imagined he was attending more as chairman of the board of Massport than as Worcester County sheriff.

Mahama also brought up the possibility of international flights between Massachusetts (alas, probably Logan rather than Worcester Regional Airport) and Ghana.

Important start

While the meeting may not have resulted in any big announcements, Murray said that it was an important start to the conversation of how Ghana and the state can collaborate.

“We want to try and begin the conversation with Central Mass. and Worcester being the hub,” Murray said.

Eric Torkornoo, a Ghanaian immigrant who works as a senior vice president at Fidelity Bank and also serves on the city’s Zoning Board of Appeals, said it was an honor for Worcester to host Her Excellency.

“Thank you for visiting Worcester and thank you for coming to encourage us,” Torkornoo said.