



THIS WEEK'S PROGRAM

May 26, 2026

2025-2026 Board Members

President Patrick Baker
Pres Elect Bill Bartee
Past Pres Kim Brattain
Secretary Bill Gill
Treasurer Craig Field
Exec Dir Christine Cipriano

Directors 2024-2026

Benton Bragg
John Cantrell
Tish Atkins Charles
Dena Diorio
Jesse Hite
Virginia Owen

Directors 2025-2027

Byrd Bergeron
Karen Calder
J Hill
Ayo Johnson
Lori Keeton
Michael Orzech
Robert Shaw
Elizabeth Teagarden
Mike Wollinger

Membership Co-Chairs:

Linwood Bolles &
Shelley Dean

Programs

Elizabeth Teagarden



MARY LOU BOURNE

*Senior Director, Charlotte
Regional Innovation Network,
NCInnovation*

by Catherine Bracey

The Rotary Club of Charlotte was pleased to welcome Mary Lou Bourne, NC Innovation Senior Director, Charlotte Regional Innovation network, to its podium for the May 26th meeting. Club member **Robert Shaw** introduced Ms. Bourne and highlighted her earlier career work at James Madison University, where she led the technology transfer and commercial realization efforts. She started the James Madison non-profit for commercial realization and intellectual property management, as well as an investor network to build up entrepreneurship in the region. Ms. Bourne is passionate about connecting people and resources to facilitate innovation and entrepreneurship.

Ms. Bourne explained that NC Innovation is a statewide organization created by the state with a \$500 million reserve. State funding for NCInnovation comes from the earnings of the corpus. The organization focuses on bridging the gap between university research and commercialization, aiming to create jobs, growth, and companies. The approach is different from other economic development organizations in that it focuses on university research as the foundational element. The strategy involves grants, mentorship, and partnerships to speed up commercialization.

Mary Lou highlighted the unique business model used by NCInnovation. The model includes 15 public universities across the state, seven hubs, and four regions. Ms. Bourne works out of the UNC-Charlotte hub. The focus is on addressing the "valley of death" gap, where grant funding dies off, and the market is not ready for innovation. This is where the organization steps in with its model, bringing together the lab, private sector, and public sector to create a pipeline of growth.

While North Carolina is recognized as the second-highest state in research and development, it is ranked 20th in innovation due to the lack of commercialization of research. This metric spurred the state leaders' recognition of the need for innovation

and economic growth. The approach has been proven successful, with 47 projects funded across the state, including eight at UNC-Charlotte.

The model involves funding good ideas, bringing them to the point of commercial viability, and providing the necessary support to make them successful. The organization is transparent, with all financial reports and annual activity available on its website. The focus is on connecting entrepreneurs and residents with the faculty to translate research into commercial viability.

The organization has been successful in initiating projects, including energy grid technology, pancreatic cancer research, no-refrigeration vaccine storage, water purification, and rail technology. Developing industry partnerships is a heavyweight in building the pipelines. NCInnovation puts a heavy emphasis on identifying, recruiting, and paying entrepreneurs who have industry and commercial experience to partner with the universities. The approach is about creating a pipeline of growth, transparency, and connectivity that will benefit North Carolina.

Ms. Bourne concluded her presentation by fielding questions from club members.

Here is the recording for the meeting:

Without slides: <https://vimeo.com/1195815538?fl=pl&fe=sh>

With slides: <https://vimeo.com/1195813682?fl=pl&fe=sh>

Dave's introduction begins at approximately 23 minutes and 50 seconds.