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By Aroostook Republic and News, Caribou, ME

County leaders attend Mobilize Maine forum

PRESQUE ISLE - Ninety leaders from throughout Aroostook County attended a June 16 meeting at the University of Maine at Presque Isle last week to learn more about Mobilize Maine, a statewide economic development initiative involving all six of the state's Economic Development Districts (EDD).

The initiative to build regional capacity is funded in part by FairPoint Communications through its planning consultant ViTAL Economy Alliance, the latter which specializes in Asset-Based Community Economic Development. A Rural Business Opportunity Grant from the U.S. Department of Agriculture to NMDC will fund a portion of the project taking place in the County.

"We are very pleased with the turnout," said Walter J. Elish, President and CEO of the Aroostook Partnership for Progress (APP). "Almost every key segment of our regional economy was represented by the attendees, and they came from throughout the region."

Consultants Jim Haguewood and Mark Madsen of ViTAL Economy Alliance explained that the focus of Mobilize Maine is empowering Aroostook County's residents to take control and stewardship of the County's economic future by leveraging the region's assets, building on its strengths to speed economic growth. Participants in this grass-roots approach to economic development will set benchmarks, create an economic vision for 2015 and recommend a recruitment plan to achieve results.

From the suggested "Challenges" and "Opportunities" gathered at the forum last week, the Leadership Team will set market-based goals. Attendees will be asked during the next three months to serve on a variety of Action Teams, with most of the required activities to occur after

the summer months. Many more people will be asked to participate as the process unfolds and more teams are formed.

Throughout the process the region will be able to launch action projects that more intently propel those long-term sustainable projects that create high-paying jobs while simultaneously developing the region's innovation assets and driving its competitive advantage.

Mobilize Maine's focus in Aroostook County will now shift back to the local Mobilize Maine Leadership Team which consists of Dave Peterson of The Aroostook Medical Center, Kris Doody of Cary Medical Center, Jon Prescott of Katahdin Trust Company, Larry Shaw of MMG Insurance, Virginia Joles of Maine Public Service, Robert Clark of NMDC, Alan Landeen of Dead River Company, Chris Anderson of F.A. Peabody, Scott Kent of United Insurance, Richard Daigle of Daigle Oil Company, Steve Gagnon of KeyBank NA, Dave Gordon of Katahdin Cedar Log Homes, Nathan Berry of Baressi Financial Inc., Town Manager Ryan Pelletier of St. Agatha, Town Manager Ray Mersereau of Mars Hill, Dr. Don Zillman of the University of Maine at Presque Isle, Dr. Richard Cost of the University of Maine at Fort Kent, and Tim Crowley of Northern Maine Community College.

Mobilize Maine is built upon an economic model to strengthen rural communities from within. It has been used elsewhere in the United States, with success. The model is designed to bring to the surface an overall regional cause that aligns the region's people, institutions, capital and infrastructure toward sustainable competitive advantage. Mobilize Maine seeks to empower local "voices" (communities, businesses and nonprofits) to determine their own economic future by setting their own asset-based long-term strategies that can then be measured with appropriate data.

"It's economic development from the inside out," said APP Chairman Chris Anderson of F.A. Peabody Company, Houlton.

In April, Governor John E. Baldacci gathered with officials from FairPoint Communications, the Department of Economic and Community Development, the Quality of Place Council and the Maine State Chamber of Commerce to announce the Mobilize Maine launch.

"What we are particularly excited about here at the Commission are the tools that the Mobilize Maine package includes," said Executive Director Robert P. Clark of NMDC.

One tool that has already been used several times since April is a programmed forecasting model that allows NMDC and APP to input a variety of economic variables and quickly calculate and forecast economic impact of proposed projects.

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