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When people think of rural areas they often think of campfires, wooded glens, and houses located here and there by pastoral streams and rivers. For many, the idea of economic development in remote and rural places is met with as much enthusiasm as the cooling embers in the campfire. For the average citizen in these areas there is often a lack of knowledge regarding the effects economic development planning has on their day to day activities and overall quality of living. Plans of any sort are sometimes viewed as just another requirement and can end up on hallway shelves where the spark found in new ideas and dreams is quickly snuffed out by dust.

In rural America, remoteness and isolation are key factors that can add to the lack of awareness as to the necessity for planning. However, when the local grocery store closes or several neighbors move away for better jobs we take notice. Economics is the fire that everyone will gather around in hopes of catching some of the warmth it brings to business and industry. In the North Country of Aroostook County, the fire does not only provide warmth, but survival. Locals tell stories of survival in the woods, lost hunters, and those who survived by their wits, flexibility, and steadfastness to stay by the fire and keep it going. These are the people of Aroostook County. As with physical survival, economic survival develops when citizens are invited and involved to pick up the poker and stoke the fire. Involvement and investment by the citizen occurs. It is the access, or lack of it, to scarce economic resources that will pull even the most reluctant bystander to the fire pit when given a "say" in the process. Aroostook County is no exception to these factors.

Aroostook County is Maine's largest county with a land area of 6,672 square miles. In fact, it is the largest county east of the Mississippi, larger than the states of Connecticut and Rhode Island combined. Located at the northeastern corner of the State, Aroostook County borders the Canadian Provinces of Quebec and New Brunswick, and is bordered by four Maine counties on its other side. By road, it is 155 miles from the northern to southern tip of what is referred to as "the County." More than 88% of the area consists of heavily wooded land that supports wood, paper, and lumber industries. Rich farmland is the source of 90% of Maine's potato crop and supplies other agricultural products, which together contribute significantly to the agricultural economy of the state. The vast natural resource base and strong

agrarian heritage have fostered an economy based upon the region's natural resources. The 1990 census population of Aroostook County's 71 municipalities and 127 unorganized townships is 86,936, with the largest population center of Presque Isle comprised of approximately 10,000 people. Northern Maine Development Commission (NMDC), a nonprofit planning and economic development agency, services 71 municipalities and Aroostook County. NMDC is one of five economic development districts in the state of Maine, and one of 320 nationwide. Initially created in the 1960s, regional development organizations (RDOs) have provided rural America with professional planning and economic development strategies and assistance.

In 1998, NMDC, with the approval of the people of Aroostook County, made a decision to seek status as an Empowerment Zone (EZ) through the USDA-Rural Development. The decision to apply came from several factors. The EZ process required grassroots planning participation from the people of Aroostook County. It was determined that this participation would take Northern Maine's Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS) to a new and greater detailed level. The EZ planning process would also provide opportunities to reach large members of the public with awareness of the current CEDS and emphasize its importance in the economic development plans for northern Maine. NMDC was assigned as the lead entity for the process of developing an EZ application and NMDC General Assembly, representing all Aroostook County communities, voted to proceed with the planning process.

The County is divided into three sub regions: north, central, and south. Each sub region is diverse in its culture and economic infrastructure. Although each sub region sees its economic situation as unique, they did not realize until the EZ planning process how similar they are in their economic needs to one another. When access to scarce economic resources occurs in rural areas, a "pulling in" can occur to protect what one has. This issue would be the cause of a few sparks in the development of the EZ Strategic Plan and application process. In addition, several more challenges presented themselves to NMDC and the people of Aroostook County. First, the EZ could only have a maximum population of 30,000, not exceed one thousand square miles in total land area, not consist of more than 3 noncontiguous parcels, not include more than three developable sites, and developable sites could not exceed 2,000 acres total. This meant that there would not be enough room around the campfire for everyone. Although everyone was wary of what might happen, years of economic struggles prompted the people of Aroostook County to proceed with the process to identify an EZ area and develop a Strategic Plan. Years of steady emigration of the working population, as well as the closure of Loring Air Force Base in 1995, reminded citizens that although these events had caused economic difficulties in the past, here was an opportunity to do something about the future.

It was agreed that the people of Aroostook County would have the say on where the fire for economic development would be built, who would sit around the circle in regards to where the EZ boundaries would be, and what communities would be

included in its area. In June, Aroostook County citizens were alerted to the planning process through newspapers, radio, and television. It was determined that Community Catalysts held in each of the sub regions (north, central, and south) would be the best way to engage citizens directly in the planning process. Everyone in Aroostook County was invited to participate. A letter and nomination form were mailed on July 7th, 1998 to all municipalities, social service organizations, economic development organizations, chambers of commerce, school districts, and educational institutions asking for participants. Maine's Governor Angus King made a public service announcement that aired on local stations for three weeks urging residents of Aroostook County to fill out the nomination form and participate in the catalyst process. Public officials, NMDC staff, and many of the local leadership made personal telephone calls to get the word out on the catalysts and to urge people to participate. One town offered to pay wages for uncompensated workers needing the day off to attend. Seventy-seven (77) nomination forms were received.

In July and August of 1998, NMDC convened and sponsored three Community Catalysts in the northern, central, and southern sub-regions of Aroostook County. The three 3-day catalyst sessions were held to encourage the greatest community participation possible to develop a strategic plan and establish the EZ boundaries. In an effort to broaden participation from the employees and owners of private businesses that usually are unable to leave their work to attend such meetings, each of the three Community Catalysts was conducted over a three-day weekend.

The northern catalyst was held at the University of Maine at Fort Kent on July 24th, 25th, and 26th and in central Aroostook in Presque Isle at the Northern Maine Technical College on the same days. The third catalyst was held on July 31st, August 1st, and 2nd in southern Aroostook in Dyer Brook at the Dyer Brook Community School. The Center for Consensual Democracy (Wiscasset, Maine) facilitated the meetings with NMDC, and reported on the outcome of each of the catalysts. The reports provided a strategic vision for Aroostook County's future, a set of prioritized goals, and the strategies to meet those goals.

Participants began the visioning and planning process by asking themselves what it is they would like the Aroostook County EZ to be in the year 2008, economically and as a social community. This began the intricate and often delicate process that would lead to the decision on the Empowerment Zone boundaries. At first, communities in the three sub-regions were afraid of being left out of the EZ and struggled to maintain their place in the process. NMDC staff kept the focus of the catalysts on creating a vision and strategic plan that would work not only for the EZ, but for all of Aroostook County. The combination of this emphasis and the sharing of visions and planning goals between sub regions, caused catalyst participants to realize their issues were strikingly similar. They quickly realized that a combined effort was needed from the whole community of Aroostook to overcome economic and social problems. All three sub-regional plans contained a goal for unifying Aroostook County behind the development effort. Participants acknowledged that without a unified effort none of the other goals could be achieved successfully. The process has

already increased networking among communities and the concept of "One Aroostook" has overridden personal allegiances and agendas.

At each catalyst site after the visioning process, participants developed objectives, projects, and tasks as their part of the Strategic Plan. This resulted in the development of the Strategic Plan before determination of the EZ boundaries. However, the process created tasks and projects for a plan that could be implemented not just for communities within the EZ boundaries, but for all of Aroostook County. NMDC was given the task of formatting the final draft of the Strategic Plan from the three Community Catalysts. As needs, projects, tasks, and goals developed in the Plan, the need to establish where projects would take place began to become apparent to participants in all three sub regions. Participants were beginning to put projects, grant criteria, and locations together through informal discussions in their communities and organizations.

Although quite a number of social service agencies were represented, the actual service population was significantly under-represented. Therefore, a survey asking clients five questions, including, what do they need to stay in Aroostook County, was developed for social service agencies to distribute to clients. Their input was necessary for a complete and comprehensive Strategic Plan. From August 7th through September 11th, 1998, 613 surveys were distributed, filled out, tallied, and returned to NMDC with the help of the Aroostook Senior Volunteer Program. Those reached through the survey included: Native Americans, students, welfare recipients, low income persons, persons with special needs, Meals on Wheels recipients, nursing and boarding home residents, congregate apartment dwellers, adult day care recipients, dining center clients, senior centers members, and in-home care clients. Surveys were hand-delivered and clients were assisted as needed. The surveys revealed that jobs and income were at the top of the list of needs for this population.

It was now time to get together to define the boundaries of the Empowerment Zone. The fire was getting hotter. A one-day meeting was held on August 7th, 1998 at the Maine School of Science and Mathematics in Limestone to combine the three visions into one, and determine the boundaries of the EZ. The meeting included nearly 40 participants from the three sub-regional catalysts. A barbecue was held with local entertainment for lunch and participants brought desserts. At this meeting the Empowerment Zone criteria was discussed and the emphasis was on creating jobs and sustained economic development. Participants were then placed into three mixed groups containing persons from the northern, central, and southern catalysts. Each group took an erasable map of Aroostook County's census tracts, measuring 24" x 36" and worked to develop their best possible scenario for the Empowerment Zone boundaries. NMDC staff assisted each group by answering EZ criteria questions, providing census tract data, and drawing the suggested boundaries on the maps. The difficulty of this task cannot be understated, as community worked with community, local citizen with service professional, knowing that they may need to remove their community from inclusion in the Empowerment Zone if it would benefit the

application and plan as a whole.

The three groups spent considerable time and developed three maps (Map A, Map B, and Map C). The participants then regrouped and each group presented its map and the reasoning for choosing the zone boundaries they had designated. A vote was taken, and Map C received the majority of the votes.

There were still questions about the Empowerment Zone criteria and the chosen map after the meeting. NMDC found that some boundaries of the map did not meet the criteria. After the meeting, NMDC worked to develop six alternative maps that followed Map C boundaries as closely as possible, yet met all zone criteria. The participants of the previous meeting on August 7th were mailed a packet containing the grant criteria, maps of the six alternatives, census tract information, and the process for voting for the one they felt was the best.

Another meeting was held on September 15th, 1998 at the Maine School of Science and Mathematics. Thirty-seven participants registered and received a voting card. Community economic distress data was reviewed and each of the proposed boundary maps was discussed. The voting was done by a "weighted pairing" of the six alternatives. Weighted pairing is a statistical average of all possible alternatives voted against one another. A map was chosen and became the designated Aroostook County Empowerment Zone. A round of applause echoed throughout the room. Aroostook County citizens had completed a process that brought a region into a unified effort to create positive change--a process never before implemented in the state of Maine and, possibly, the United States. They had developed a vision and a strategic plan for the Aroostook County Empowerment Zone.

The three reports from the sub regional Community Catalysts had shown distinct agreement on top priorities for increasing economic opportunity in the EZ. NMDC staff brought the results of the three meetings into one strategic plan for the Aroostook County EZ. In addition, elements from two other important planning processes were integrated into this basic plan: (1) Local Comprehensive Planning--eleven communities within the designated EZ boundaries had completed local comprehensive plans; and (2) an Overall Economic Development Program (OEDP) (CEDS)--Northern Maine, designated as an Economic Development District by EDA, completed the required five-year update in 1997, complete with new goals and strategies. Both the local comprehensive planning process and the CEDS, formerly called the OEDP and funded by EDA, require extensive community participation. In addition to funding in part the Empowerment Zone Strategic Plan, EDA funding in 1995 was used to plan and implement a marketing communication program for the region. The primary and secondary research used to create the marketing plan, and the experience gained in implementation has provided valuable supporting information in developing the Aroostook County Empowerment Zone Strategic Plan and application. Although there are eight goals designated by catalyst participants as vital to the economic sustainability and growth of Aroostook County, the number one

goal is to support business success.

Private and public resources are focusing on providing the supportive environment needed to encourage the growth and success of existing businesses, as well as new start-ups. NMDC is acting as the single point of contact that coordinates the financial, training, and technical assistance programs in a package that meets individual business needs. It is essential to foster involvement from the local private sector, and from local citizens, in creating a vital economic future. The community must stay unified behind this effort for the vision to be realized. Supporting this goal includes targeting industries for development that make the best use of the region's resources. Among those are value-added wood product businesses, i.e., furniture blanks, hardwood flooring, etc., and value-added agricultural products. An emphasis is also placed on research to identify emerging opportunities and target telecommunications-intensive industries. Another identified strategy was to develop programs to assist business start-up and expansion with a regional equity capital fund (TOP-Targeted Opportunities Program), loan pools, and skill re-training programs and facilities. The encouragement of private sector involvement in business development and streamlining regulatory requirements are also identified strategies. Regional partnerships and cross-industry alliances and networks are also noted as strategies to promote business success as well.

This goal and others, along with accompanying strategies, have been integrated into the CEDS strategy for northern Maine. Aroostook County is moving forward to attain these goals. Several communities have organized additional groups and planning sessions to further the economic goals established in the EZ Strategic Plan and CEDS. In 1999, Aroostook County was designated a Champion Community and NMDC staff are currently expanding benchmarks within its EZ Strategic Plan toward the goals of supporting business success and others. Projects are being received daily for inclusion in the plan that are targeting existing business support and expansion.

The CEDS for Northern Maine has been the fire of economic development in this region since the implementation of the OEDP in 1975. Years of the vital OEDP process laid the groundwork for the present day CEDS and preparation for the EZ Strategic Plan and application. Twenty-eight Economic Development District Council members from throughout the region representing business, industry, agriculture, utilities, education and training, and health agencies, among other interests, keep the fire burning brightly for the Aroostook County economy and oversee the CEDS. The EZ Strategic Plan has become part of the larger CEDS strategy for Northern Maine, strengthening and detailing this region's economic future.

Although the embers of the EZ application process are now cold, every citizen of Aroostook County learned that there was more room around the fire than had been thought, as the realization of benefits from EZ projects would reach beyond the EZ borders. Or, that the fire found in economic development planning is more than just about survival. It is about creativity, flexibility, and "give and take" to create business

sustainability and success on a regional level. Many participants carried a light home to their communities to fire economic development individually and as a whole for Aroostook County. As for sharing stories, we invite you to pull up your chair. There is room around the fire. For more information on this planning process or how to implement a community catalyst call Linda Berube at the Northern Maine Development Commission at 207-498-8736 or email: [lberube@nmdc.org](mailto:lberube@nmdc.org), or write Northern Maine Development Commission, P.O. Box 779, Caribou, Maine, 04736.