

Bid to stem outmigration aired

County leader: New industry, people needed to save small towns

PRESQUE ISLE - Aroostook County has lost a quarter of its population during the past 50 years, and it stands to lose another big chunk that could pull the population below 50,000 if something is not done to stop the outmigration, a community leader said Tuesday. All is not lost, but something needs to be done so small towns are not lost, the president of the Aroostook Partnership for Progress told potato growers and industry leaders Tuesday.

"It's never too late to do something," said Nick Bayne, who also is the president of Maine Public Service Co. "The worst thing would be that nothing at all happens. Aroostook needs to change its economic base. We need something new to drive economic development," he said. "We need to develop new industries."

Bayne, who moved to Aroostook County 21/2 years ago from the southern United States, believes Maine, but especially Aroostook County, needs to bring in new people and not just one or two at a time.

Aroostook Partnership for Progress has raised \$1.5 million from the private sector that will be matched by public sector funds to develop new industries for Aroostook County.

The money, raised over a period of less than one year, has created a fund that will be used to help new industries and to lure industries from elsewhere to Aroostook County.

It is looking at creating a resort industry in Maine's northernmost regions. It also is investigating the creation of an air cargo logistics project, more energy projects to help the area become a contributor to the pipeline, downtown revival throughout the County, and creation of a dot-com outlet that would entice companies to Aroostook County instead of offshore.

"It took us four to five months to raise the money and we have only been working at ideas ... for the last 60 days or so," he said after speaking with the farming community. "We do this to change the economic base of Aroostook County. We need something new to drive the economy," he said. "We need to develop new things to bring people and money here."

Aroostook County is at a crossroads, potato growers were told. If the forest industry doesn't improve, if farming doesn't grow and towns don't pick up, Aroostook County could lose 10,000 more people, maybe more, in the next 20 years.

"We need to stop the outmigration, and turn it around by bringing in more people," he said. "Our primary export has been young minds. It's still happening," he continued. "We need more good-paying jobs because low-paying jobs are not the aspiration of young people."

Growers were told competition comes from all over the world, and unless things change, not only in Aroostook County but in the United States, the grandchildren of today's generation may experience something starkly different.

"We stand on a threshold, and unless we change, we will find our children's well-being will be less than ours," he told the group. "We were put here to make this a better place."