

# Houlton debates economic growth strategy

March 22, 2004

HOULTON - Town councilors pored over an economic development and strategic marketing plan during a Monday evening workshop, debating strategies they believed to be crucial in marketing Houlton on both a state and national level. They reached no conclusions by the end of the session, but anticipate adopting a plan at their March 22 meeting.

Councilors mulled the report, prepared by Jim Damicis Associates of Scarborough, during much of the nearly two-hour meeting.

Data in the report, gathered at forums held during the fall of 2003, highlighted assets the town could use to attract additional businesses, tourism and trade into the area.

"I think we need to take a serious look at this study," Town Manager Peggy Daigle said on Monday. "The consultants have pulled out key economic development strategies that we can work on ... and we can look for businesses and organizations to partner with us to carry out this plan."

Councilors debated whether they should hire an economic development director to market the town or team up with existing organizations to implement the strategic plan.

Councilor Gerald Adams said that there was a great need for an economic development director for the town.

"Businesses have showed interest in Houlton," Adams said, "and when some didn't settle here ... I asked why. From what they told me, no one ever followed up with them to check out why they relocated somewhere else. That saddens me. Our grant writer [Don Keiser] seems to be involved with economic development, but we need more."

Councilor Phil Bernaiche agreed with Adams, but also thought that more support was needed from existing organizations.

"We give money to SADC [Southern Aroostook Development Corp.] and to the Northern Maine Development Commission [NMDC] ... let's put some pressure on them to do something," Bernaiche said.

Daigle called the services of both SADC and NMDC "invaluable." SADC had made numerous "cold calls," Daigle said, to introduce business owners to opportunities in southern Aroostook.

"I've been to some of those meetings and saw the same people on those committees that were there five years ago, and we're not going anywhere," Adams said. "We need revitalization ... Cold calls went out with the Cold War."

Councilor John Fitzpatrick said that money needed to be put into both infrastructure and revitalizing Houlton's downtown.

"I think that we need infrastructure, we need ground for people to work on," Fitzpatrick said.

"Many buildings downtown are old and need to be upgraded ... Maybe it is time to hire a downtown manager for that area ... and create other jobs to go with it."

Bernaiche disagreed, calling the hiring of a downtown manager "the biggest joke of all."

Chairman Dale Flewelling said that downtown business owners had a "responsibility" to their own buildings.

"Years ago, we spent about \$3 million to revitalize the downtown," Flewelling said.

"In reality, the town does not own property in downtown Houlton ... We are not in the building maintenance business, but we should assist."

Continuing to urge for an economic development director, Adams read a job description he drafted for the position.

"We need someone who can motivate others," Adams said. "We don't have to give him a huge salary ... He could receive bonuses ... as he brings businesses to town."

Daigle disagreed, saying that she found some of Adams' statements "contradictory."

"You said that economic development takes a lot of time, and that we don't need to pay this person a lot," Daigle said. "I am fearful that the [proposed] workload is more than anyone can do."