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Conference Executive Summary: Regionalism and “The County”-Connecting Services

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CONFERENCE EXECUTIVE SUMMARY
Regionalism and “The County” – Connecting Services

Caribou Inn and Convention Center, Caribou Maine
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By

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INTRODUCTION

This report summarizes Northern Maine Development Commission's regional summit: *Regionalism and "The County" - Connecting Services*. This important and timely conference explored examples and challenges of building municipal cooperation in areas such as road maintenance, public safety, waste disposal, and sustained citizen engagement in regional governance. The conference's three objectives were:

- To examine demographic trends in Aroostook County that suggest increased municipal cooperation is needed;
- To explore existing examples of municipal cooperation in Aroostook County and;
- To assemble municipal leadership to discuss the opportunities and challenges of enhancing regional thinking and municipal cooperation in Aroostook County.

Municipal cooperation in K-12 education was intentionally not examined as part of this conference due to time constraints and the relative magnitude of this issue. A future workshop on this topic is planned for the spring or summer of 2005.

In spite of coinciding with the arrival of the season's first serious snowstorm, registrations exceeded expectations and the conference facility was full – over 150 enthusiastic individuals representing municipal, county, private, and non-profit organizations attended. Plenary sessions were presented by Dr. Charles Colgan (Muskie School of Public Policy, University of Southern Maine), Ms. Nancy Stark (Rural Policy Research Institute, University of Missouri), and several local municipal leaders identified later in this report. Maine Governor John Baldacci provided the keynote luncheon presentation. During afternoon breakout sessions, local officials shared their views on the opportunities and challenges of municipal cooperation and regionalism. Facilitated professionally, these breakout sessions reveal the varied perspectives of local municipal leaders on subjects such as local control and municipal cooperation.

PLENARY SESSIONS

Dr. Charles Colgan: Aroostook County Demographics and Out-Migration

Colgan's presentation emphasized that enhanced municipal cooperation is one of many strategies that should be considered to slow youth out-migration and stabilize the population. Aroostook County's 1980 population was 91,153. In 2000, the population fell to 73,891, a decline of 19%, and is forecast to decline to about 60,000 by 2025. Youth out-migration is one contributor to population decline and is something Aroostook County leaders may be able to stem. Colgan offered the

following statistics based on his recent report: *Migration and Youth Migration from Aroostook County – Trends, Factors and Implications*¹.

- Between 1995 and 2002, an average of 1,200 persons out-migrated (left) Aroostook County annually. Roughly, 50% left for another part of Maine and roughly, 50% left the state entirely.
- Approximately 27% of Aroostook County high school students expect to live in Aroostook County. About 37% of those attending college in Aroostook County expect to live in Aroostook County;
- Some 62% of Aroostook County high school students going on to college intend to do so outside of Aroostook County;
- Aroostook County youth prefer small cities and rural areas to large cities;
- High school girls have higher educational aspirations and are more likely to indicate they will leave Aroostook County. High school boys are more likely to leave Aroostook County for reasons besides education.

In Colgan's view, the key to youth migration is that Aroostook County youth expect to get higher education, expect the occupations and incomes that come with higher education, and want to live in places that provide those opportunities.

Local Municipal Cooperation and Regionalization

This section summarizes the comments of three local leaders regarding municipal cooperation and regionalism: Mr. Mark Draper, Director of the Tri-Community Recycling and Sanitary Landfill; Mr. John Edgecomb, Town Manager of Mapleton, Chapman and Castle Hill; and Mr. J. Nick Bayne, representing the Aroostook Partnership for Progress.

Mr. Draper addressed the history of the Tri-Community Recycling and Sanitary Landfill (TCRSL) and why it succeeds as a collaborative effort of 35 municipalities. Formed in 1977 by the municipalities of Caribou, Limestone, and Fort Fairfield, TCRSL sited and constructed a regional 'attenuation' landfill in Fort Fairfield. In 1989, faced with Department of Environmental Protection rules forcing the imminent closure of many old dumps and the Fort Fairfield landfill, the three communities determined that a regional, secure landfill was the best option. Over time, TCRSL crafted a new inter-local agreement to include the other 32 municipalities that currently use the facility.

TCRSL is governed by a Board of Directors comprised of a municipal manager from each owner municipality and appointed representatives. In Draper's opinion, the

¹ Commissioned by The Northern Maine Empowerment Council

organization works because there is a common challenge and catalyst, a common benefit, shared goals, and a clear understanding of and agreement in the rules through the inter-local agreement.

Mr. Edgecomb addressed the sharing of services by the municipalities of Castle Hill, Chapman, and Mapleton. Not only do the three towns share Edgecomb as their town manager, but they also have signed an inter-local agreement that provides the basis for cost sharing in: fire protection, highway maintenance (not including paving or culvert repair), recreation, buildings and grounds maintenance, septic sludge site operations, animal control, planning, code enforcement, and insurance and employee benefit expenses. The three towns have collaborated since the mid-1970's; initially with an agreement to combine highway

services, then more formally in the 1980's when they jointly constructed a municipal building for general government and the fire and highway departments. Edgecomb believes that collaboration works for three reasons: the goals for services are similar, a solid dedication by the towns to work together, and the political boundaries of the three towns abut.

Inter-Local Agreements

Inter-local agreements take a variety of forms. The most common form involves a formal contract for services between two municipalities under which one municipality agrees to provide a service to another municipality for an agreed price. For example, a city may contract with another city for law enforcement services. Agreements may also take the form of a joint service agreement where two or more municipalities together agree to finance and deliver a service within the boundaries of all participating municipalities.

Mr. J. Nick Bayne addressed economic development and the efforts of Aroostook Partnership for Progress (APP), to promote economic activity in Aroostook County. APP is a non-profit, public-private partnership dedicated to aggressive and effective results-oriented economic development actions that leverage the financial commitments of the private sector in close partnership with the public sector. One of APP's objectives is to promote economic regionalism. Their perspective is countywide and their membership reflects it. Bayne emphasized the importance of expanding economic initiatives to include the Canadian Maritime provinces, addressing the issue of deferred maintenance, and creating an environment conducive for private investment.

Ms. Nancy Stark: Regionalism and "The County" - Effective Rural Governance

Stark's comments focused on Aroostook County's challenges and the ingredients of effective governance. Cited challenges include isolation, decline in the forest products industry, youth out-migration, and fears of regionalism (losing control).

Stark strongly recommended that the term “regionalism” be struck from organizers’ language as it carries a negative connotation with many. She urged attention to “regional governance” instead, which is more than “government.” She cited three primary ingredients of effective governance: collaboration across sectors and geographic borders, sustained citizen engagement, and exploiting regional resources. Regarding collaboration, she indicated that formal agreements among entities are often required and that because economies do not respect political borders, economic development is best done regionally. Regarding citizen engagement, leaders should welcome youth, under-represented groups such as Native Americans, and under-valued talent such as artists and teachers. To exploit regional resources, she recommended analyzing the region’s competitive advantages, strengthening competencies of local leaders (especially local elected officials), and engaging key intermediaries including colleges, community foundations, and economic development agencies like the Northern Maine Development Commission.

Governor John E. Baldacci

Governor Baldacci lauded conference organizers and attendees for addressing the issue of regionalism in Aroostook County. He emphasized the importance of municipal cooperation in Aroostook County and for the State of Maine. He stated that Aroostook County’s efforts might serve as a role model for other areas of the state. He also reminded attendees that state planning grants are available to municipalities through recently passed legislation: LD 1930 “An Act to Promote Intergovernmental Cooperation, Cost Savings and Efficiencies.”

AFTERNOON BREAKOUT SESSIONS

Midway through the summit, participants broke into five groups, each including representatives from municipalities of a variety of size and location, for facilitated discussions regarding the opportunities and challenges of municipal cooperation. Their comments were recorded during the breakout sessions. The sessions were facilitated by a professional consultant (Co-Vista, Blue Hill, Maine) who also surveyed Aroostook County municipal officials prior to the conference.

Breakout Session 1 – Defining Local Control

Each group responded to the following three questions: “How do we define local control?”, “Are there gaps or redundancies among our municipalities?”, and “Where are the opportunities for sharing and regionalizing?”. Below are selected participant comments and observations.

How do we define local control?

- It does not have to be local control. It could be “regional control.”
- Local control requires involvement of the constituents as early on in the process as possible - the earlier the involvement, the better.
- In order to discuss properly local control, we need to define clearly the term “local.” This concept can have different meanings depending on the area.
- Local control can be defined as the ability of a town to define and direct its future.
- Local control is financial control.
- Local control is autonomy and the ability to make own decisions.
- Need to have a cultural change to move away from municipality-based thinking to regional-based thinking

Are there gaps among our municipalities?

- Technology is sparse among municipalities.
- Ambulance and EMS services
- Caribou police are taking on services once performed by State police and sheriffs.

Are there redundancies among our municipalities?

- Police and fire department services
- Health care
- Public safety dispatching services (not 911)
- Fire department inspections
- School administration officials
- School bus services

What are the opportunities for sharing and regionalizing?

- Public safety personnel and equipment (fire and police)
- Highway maintenance, snow plowing
- School systems
- Solid waste management
- Recreation

- Code enforcement
- Public utilities and public works (share capital investments)
- Healthcare
- Grant writing
- Public works
- Tax assessment services
- Public safety dispatching – develop regional dispatch center

Breakout Session 2 –Acceptable Levels of Service

The second breakout session asked participants to address the question, “What are acceptable levels of service?” Although this proved to be a difficult question, the groups generally believed that “it depends.” Below are selected participant comments and observations.

What are acceptable levels of service?

- It is highly dependent on the type of community you are referring to – what is acceptable at the urban level may not be acceptable at the rural level.
- Better service can be a driver for regional initiatives, not just lower cost.
- People make choices on where they want to live and so people have to take responsibility for their choices when they complain about inadequate levels of service.
- What is acceptable is what is needed to attract business and people (e.g., schools so people bring their families).
- 15-minute ambulance response
- Acceptable service is dictated by what the collective is willing to pay.

At the conclusion of this breakout session, participants responded to the question “Where do we go from here?” Presented below are selected participant recommendations.

Where do we go from here?

- Start with points of least resistance.
- Recognize that collaborating on services may impact small businesses that lose contracts.

- Develop a written strategic plan to give the task force and *ensure* implementation.
- Look for duplication of services.
- Capitalize on what we have done already. Publicize our innovation and collaboration to get more acceptances for future projects.
- Continually search for cost savings and efficiencies before economic realities force us to change in ways we do not want.
- The NMDC (Northern Maine Development Commission) needs to educate council people. Make an appointment to go to a meeting and share best practices and ideas from across the county.
- Keep our eyes on Governor Baldacci's plan for grants.
- As a group, we can meet again and share details of best practices with each other.

OBSERVATIONS & PERSPECTIVE

The conference was well organized and well attended with officials representing local, county, and state levels of government. Most were from Aroostook County, and a few traveled from Waldo and Cumberland counties. Participants and presenters were engaged throughout the conference. The tone set by conference organizers was respectful and not “top-down.” The morning plenary sessions provided meaningful information and illustrated “best-practice” approaches that appear to be working in Aroostook County as well as nationally. Governor Baldacci’s presentation reinforced the importance of regionalism as a statewide issue. The afternoon breakout sessions encouraged participants to express their views on regionalism and its threat to local control. The demeanor of these views was forthright, respectful, and tolerant. Participants actively listened to each other and a general feeling of goodwill was apparent. At the end of the conference, participants, presenters, and organizers came together and agreed that a follow-up conference on the theme of regional governance in Aroostook County should be pursued.

Developing a regional perspective and enhancing municipal cooperation are difficult tasks anywhere. Maine and New England’s strong sense of individualism and community may make these tasks more challenging. Gerald Benjamin, in his book *Regionalism and Realism*, suggests there are three perspectives on regionalism: redistributive, functional, and economic. Redistributive regionalism focuses on equity - ensuring that all citizens have equal access to services. Functional regionalism emphasizes efficiency and minimizing the costs of providing services. Economic regionalism focuses on economic development and its emphasis on cooperation. The difficulty is that one perspective can conflict with another. For example, providing timely fire protection to all can conflict with centralizing fire protection services to

reduce the cost of providing that protection. In many cases, reconciling these perspectives is the central issue in determining whether positive change occurs. With this summit, Aroostook County leaders took an important step toward identifying and addressing issues related to regionalism and enhanced municipal cooperation. Future conferences and other countywide activities will build on this success.

Pre-Conference Survey Results

Prior to the conference, twenty town and county level administrators were surveyed regarding their communities' involvement in, and beliefs about, cooperative inter-local service agreements, or "regionalism." The consultant reported that four dominant themes emerged from the survey.

Regionalism and inter-local agreements *are* happening in the County

- A strong cooperation already exists among neighboring municipalities in Aroostook County.
- Some of the agreements appear to be the result of history or tradition – a "good neighbor" mentality.
- A large proportion of the existing agreements came from identifying redundancies in the name of simplifying municipal operations.

Challenging economic times will demand more regionalism

- Municipal administrators expressed that 'like-it-or-not,' they are going to have to do more regionalizing.

The greatest barrier to regionalism was a fear of losing local identity and local control

- This concern was of particular importance to administrators of smaller municipalities, who believed that regionalism could result in sacrificing their local identity.
- Administrators from larger municipalities expressed saving taxpayer dollars and a simplification of operations as their primary and secondary goals.
- When asked about assuming control of smaller municipalities, leaders from the larger municipalities often replied this was the last thing they need or wanted to take on.

Regionalism is the key to preserving identity and control of smaller towns

- Out-migration occurs when services can no longer be provided by a municipality.
- Residents migrate to municipalities where those services can be found.
- Smaller municipalities must engage in regionalism to prevent discontinuing services.

Source: Co-Vista, Blue Hill, Maine, 2004

Note: These findings were not presented at the conference

SUGGESTED READINGS & SOURCES OF INFORMATION

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Maine State Planning Office's web site (<http://www.state.me.us/spo/>). This site contains information on *The Fund for the Efficient Delivery of Local and Regional Services*. This fund was established to encourage and support cooperation amongst intergovernmental organizations and municipalities, in part so that they will serve as models from which other Maine communities may learn and follow.