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Amber Lambke

Maine Grain Alliance, lambke@myfairpoint.net

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The Renaissance of a Food-Based Economy in Skowhegan

by Amber Lambke

In 2007, community members in Skowhegan, Maine, aimed to address the growing “locavore” movement and demand for locally grown grains for bread baking by starting a conference that would bring together grain growers, bread bakers, millers, and wood-fired-oven builders annually for discussions on the topic of reviving regional grain economies. Now in its fifth year, the conference has grown from 75 participants in 2007 to 225 participants in 2010; an Artisan Bread Fair attracted 3,000 people last year to the Skowhegan State Fair Grounds, home of the nation’s longest running agricultural fair. The conference has also spawned the renovation of a former county jail in Skowhegan to become a gristmill, the start-up of baking businesses and hand building of ovens across the nation, and the expansion of the Kneading Conference to include an event in Mt. Vernon, Virginia, in September 2011. Local organizers are linking educational, health, and entrepreneurial activities in a broad network of public-private partnership to advance regional food systems and better health.

Facing the vacancy of a historic 14,000-square-foot Victorian jailhouse in their downtown and the lack of gristmills that once serviced a robust grain economy in central Maine, friends and cofounders of the Kneading Conference, Amber Lambke and Michael Scholz, joined together to buy the building and formed the Somerset Grist Mill. After three years of research and development, the project is poised to complete a

first phase of renovations by the summer of 2011 and to start milling grain grown in Maine. The milling operation anchors this expanding food hub that is fast becoming a vibrant marketplace for buyers and sellers of local food.

In 2009, Skowhegan’s year-round weekly farmers’ market moved to the Somerset Grist Mill. It offers face-to-face retail sales and a family-friendly, social, and educational gathering place. Plans to house a year-round retail and wholesale marketplace are currently underway, which will make local food available to an expanded core of customers from institutions, restaurants, manufacturers, retail grocers, schools, and members of both the business and the low-income communities. The commercial kitchen and cold-storage facilities onsite further broaden the prospects for product lines made from local foods for value-added food distribution. The gristmill will soon be the home of the Kneading Conference mobile wood-fired oven, which will be used for community suppers and baking workshops when not on the road going to schools for bread baking with children.

The transformation of the former jail into a gathering place and hub of entrepreneurial activity has already become a point of pride for local citizens living in one of Maine’s poorest counties. In Skowhegan, poverty (16.2 percent), childhood obesity (93.6 percent), and hunger are prevalent; 51 percent of the town’s population qualifies for federal nutrition-assistance programs. The Somerset Grist Mill and Skowhegan farmers’ market are collaborating with local physicians and foundations to encourage Skowhegan’s low-income population to buy fresh local foods. Through support from the Wholesome Wave Foundation, users of federal nutrition-assistance programs are offered “double dollars” on their food purchases at the farmers’ market, and local physicians are offering “veggie prescriptions,” \$10 prescriptions to pregnant mothers for fresh fruits and vegetables from the farmers’ market. Weekly 5K fun runs in the summer that begin and end at the gristmill further contribute to promoting healthy lifestyles and bringing the community together.

Driven by grassroots efforts and innovative public and private collaboration, the renaissance of a food-based economy is underway in Skowhegan. 