

Forum focuses on need to act

NORTH COUNTRY SYMPOSIUM:

Speakers talk of ways to bolster economy during hard times

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ARTICLE OPTIONS



CANTON — Karen M. St. Hilaire opened the North Country Symposium with a challenge.

The St. Lawrence County administrator asked the 150 participants to roll up their sleeves and make their ideas happen.

"It is time for action," she said. "So do it. Just do it. The time for talk is over."

This year's forum focused on ways to pull the region out of recession.

"There are more people all over the region who are struggling, and that's why we decided to do this," said James C. Shuman, chairman of the symposium steering committee. "The crisis is simply an indicator that we need to change our thinking about the economy."

Ms. St. Hilaire pointed to the opportunities to retrain workers, weatherize and build affordable homes and expand broadband Internet access.

"We lost over 1,000 jobs in St. Lawrence County last year. Our unemployment rate is 11 percent, the second highest in the state behind Lewis County," she said. "We need to refocus our efforts from trying to attract that one big industry from outside to strengthening the businesses we already have here."

Jeffrey Yost, president and chief executive officer

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of the Nebraska Community Foundation, was this year's keynote speaker.

"There are no silver bullets. It has taken us a long time to get in trouble in these places, and it's going to take a long time to get out. These aren't scary times; these are massive opportunities," he said.

Mr. Yost said rural Nebraska shares many similarities with Northern New York, and offered some advice for growth. He said communities need to get rid of their "self-fulfilling prophecy" mind-sets, which tell young people that they can't settle where they grew up.

"What we need for tomorrow's economy is to have more and more people with opportunities here," Mr. Yost said.

Many of the speakers at the seventh annual event pointed to areas where growth is possible.

Louise E. Gava, St. Lawrence University's sustainability coordinator, and Bernadette Logozar of the Cornell Cooperative Extension's Malone office both talked about the market for local food. Ms. Logozar has been developing the North Country Regional Foods Initiative. Ms. Gava works with GardenShare, which conducted a trial project to store produce so area farmers could sell local fruits and vegetables for longer. The facility could barely keep pace with demand.

Kathryn M. DelGuidice, director of SUNY Canton's Center for Lifelong Learning, spoke about an unsung sector of "green collar jobs"— making homes more energy-efficient.

"Conservation isn't as sexy as renewable energy, but it's important," she said.

Brent A. Buchanan, of Cooperative Extension's Canton office, also talked about the green opportunity of biofuels. He said that surveys show there are 68,253 acres of unharvested cropland in Jefferson, St. Lawrence, Lewis and Franklin counties. That land could be used as a source of wood chips, switchgrass

and other plant materials that can be converted into ethanol or biofuel, Mr. Buchanan said.

The symposium is funded by the university's Ellen C. Burt Endowment for North Country Education, which was established in 2002.

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North County Symposium:
www.northcountysymposium.org