



*"Leading change for a vibrant future"*

# Rural Empowerment Summit Overview

## The Event

Out-migration has been a reality in northern Maine for decades. Determined to change this trend, more than 160 interested citizens from across the region gathered in Presque Isle January 23-24, 2003, to participate in the Rural Empowerment Summit.

The Rural Empowerment Summit was designed to mobilize residents to create positive change that will entice people and businesses to move into rather than out of the area. During the event participants learned about major issues surrounding rural development from a state and national perspective, and then spent time working together to develop innovative, productive solutions to these issues.

While focusing on the importance of forming collaborative, regional strategies, participants from fields such as social services, health care, finance, education, forestry, agriculture, and other interested community members listened, learned, and went into action.

Four speakers set the stage for the event. Chuck Fluharty, Director of the Rural Policy Research Institute (RUPRI) at the University of Missouri, provided statistical information, substantiating and validating northern Maine's out-migration phenomena. His presentation provided a context for solution strategies and can be found at <http://www.rupri.org>.

Hugh Coppen, President of Winning Leadership Inc., a professional leadership and change management company, built off of Fluharty's address by discussing the dynamics of change and how important it is to lead change rather than to react to it.

Gilbert Gonzalez, Deputy Under Secretary of the United States Department of Agriculture - Rural Development, provided information on the Empowerment Zone program, and representatives of the Griggs-Steele Empowerment Zone in North Dakota, the only other rural zone in the country designated under out-migration, shared their experiences with the challenges of out-migration.

## LEADERS

*Encouraging Aroostook Development*



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Local Workforce Investment  
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Center  
Loring Development Authority  
Maine & Company  
Maine Community Foundation  
Maine Manufacturing  
Extension Partnership  
Maine Potato Board  
Maine Public Service  
Maine Small Business  
Development Centers  
Northeast Publishing Co./  
PrintWorks  
USDA Rural Development

# The Process

Armed with this insight, participants formed five teams or focus groups to brainstorm innovative strategic actions to stop out-migration. Those teams were:

- economic development,
- education,
- infrastructure,
- private business, and
- social services.

Each group worked with a facilitator to collaboratively identify and prioritize both the **process characteristics** that must be in place and the **strategic actions** that must be put in motion to ensure success in reversing out-migration.

In order for the action plans to work, participants felt that several process characteristics must be kept in the forefront. As highlighted below, these generally focus on the need to work together as a region rather than to compete against each other.

## Spirit

- Willingness to change
- Celebration of success
- Maintaining an attitude of trust
- Overcoming resistance to change

## Unity

- A collaborative effort across all sectors and the region to eliminate redundancy
- Recognize the need for unity – 1<sup>st</sup> with ourselves, 2<sup>nd</sup> with Maine as a whole
- Regional thinking
- Shared ownership
- Elimination of competition within the County
- Common goal
- Champions with a common voice (beyond an individual)
- Maintain public contact and consensus
- Coordinated efforts

## Leadership

- Create clear goals with clear accountability
- Correct leadership, namely have one lead entity coordinating the various fronts
- Evaluate and re-evaluate to make sure it is working
- Prioritize honestly
- Set timelines with definitive benchmarks
- Determine clear vision, tasks, and objectives

## Due Diligence

- Collect correct data through an asset inventory
- Communicate openly and effectively, both internally and externally
- Explore existing successful models
- Improve business climate
- Work with existing companies
- Remove bureaucratic red tape

# The Action Plans

After agreeing on the need to work collaboratively as a region, each team focused on action plans in their assigned sector and generated a list of innovative approaches to reverse out-migration. The prioritized findings follow by sector or team.

## Education

1. Package attractive scholarship programs with targeted student loan forgiveness programs.
2. Create programs to market/promote excellent schools and colleges located in northern Maine.
3. Generate \$1 million for UMPI, UMFK, NMTC, and Houlton to work with students to create business plans for businesses that will attract young people (20's and 30's) and young professionals.
4. Create a workforce training collaborative with the business sector.
5. Develop better marketing of the region's educational system
6. Total educational sector buy-in.
  - Undergraduate research related to business expansion
  - Internships

## The Action Plans (continued)

### Private Business

1. Create an entrepreneurial spirit and program to generate start-ups. Have northern Maine be the place in the state for start-up business.
2. Create excitement inside/outside the County.
3. Identify affiliate organizations to raise private sector awareness and involvement.
  - Find private sector “champions.”
  - Develop a master website as an informational clearinghouse and as a vehicle to bring all diverse interests to the table.
  - Develop jobs, people, and outreach.
4. Explore other models and use, as appropriate.
5. Develop a regional analysis of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats.
6. Encourage internships in the business sector.
7. Promote those quality jobs that are here and aggregate the promotional effort.

### Infrastructure

We must have a common voice regionally, to address the following.

1. Transportation
  - Highway (e.g., north/south highway, Route 1, and Route 11)
  - Improved quality of air service
  - Retention and expansion of rail service
2. Access to telecommunications
  - Consolidation of technology
  - Standard availability
3. Environmental regulation
  - Single source review of permitting leads to efficient development
4. Higher Education
  - Remove financial barriers
  - Provide incentives
  - Develop community college plans

### Social Services

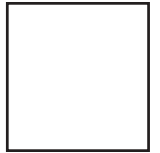
1. Regionalize health care, schools, and municipal government services.
2. Bring wages and benefits to levels consistent with southern Maine.
3. Promote our assets to ourselves and to others.
4. Identify and create opportunities.

### Economic Development

1. **Must** change business climate!!
  - Lobby for **changes** in business climate. Go to Augusta!
  - Look at other states to see how we can improve. No longer acceptable to be 48<sup>th</sup>!
2. **County** government should handle more governance currently done at the **local** level.
3. Focus on encouraging “**in-migration.**”
4. Need for an “Aroostook” mindset.
  - Work together – not compete
  - Coordinate calendars, services
  - Find a local solution before ‘solutions’ imposed from outside
  - Inform communities of the need for regional solutions, so we are all on board
5. Invest in tourism to develop regional awareness and to encourage in-migration of families who left and are looking for a place to raise a family or retire.
  - Include arts and culture
  - Target markets to include citizens of Maine. Encourage residents of southern Maine to come to northern Maine.
  - Encourage residents of the three regions of Aroostook to become aware of the others’ assets through tourism
6. Continue to improve efficient service delivery by regional health care providers to avoid duplication.



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## What Now?

Summit participants from across the region worked collaboratively during the event to develop a number of significant ideas. The momentum cannot stop there. As Hugh Coppen said in his final presentation, a vibrant future for northern Maine means the citizens of the region must take ownership and they must take action. Businesses, organizations, and individuals must collaborate to put these plans into play. Continued competition will lead to continued out-migration.

One theme that rose from the group work was an acknowledgment of the need for leadership. Robert Clark, Executive Director of Northern Maine Development Commission, has committed his organization to carry the momentum of the summit by leading the effort. This means that NMDC will marshal the resources to reverse out-migration. It will develop new initiatives, help organizations implement those initiatives, track the results, and generally help keep the efforts on course using the outcomes of the summit as a guide.

If you would like to be part of the effort to reverse out-migration in northern Maine, please contact:

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