

Finding an identity: Stakeholders talk regional economic profile of Sullivan County

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Sullivan County Manager Derek Ferland addresses the participants at the Regional Economic Profile discussion on Tuesday.

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NEWPORT — The debate of how best to aid in development efforts across Sullivan County continued on Tuesday night as business and nonprofit leaders and local government officials met to discuss the creation of a Regional Economic Profile.

The University of New Hampshire's Cooperative Extension facilitated the discussion, focusing on what various community partners said were the areas that need to be addressed. UNHCE Field Specialist Penny Whitman, UNHCE Program Team Leader Charlie French and UNHCE Extension Specialist Molly Donovan led the meeting, asking the various people in attendance to outline the challenges facing the county.

“The whole idea is that we are trying to engage people across the region, geographically speaking,” French said.

The discussion was a continuation from previous meetings of the group in which several pillars of areas for improvement around the county were brainstormed: diversified economy, workforce development, human and social capital, robust economic infrastructure and quality of life.

“We're not trying to shoot for the moon initially,” French said. “We're just trying to get some of these things going.”

Participants at Tuesday's meeting in the Sugar River Valley Regional Technical Center in Newport were asked to outline some of the challenges that they see in the community for addressing the previously identified pillars.

Responses ranged from the need to develop technology to supporting industries which garner higher average wages. Much of the discussion shifted, however after Claremont Mayor Charlene Lovett noted that the region has an undefined identity.

“There's a lot of very ingrained perceptions of Sullivan County that do not necessarily reflect what is going on,” Lovett said.

Claremont Business Development Specialist Rebecca Vinduska elaborated further on the subject with the observation that Sullivan County lies at the outskirts of the better-defined Lake Sunapee Region and the Upper Valley.

The identity connected most concretely to the area is that of the Precision Valley. However, other people in attendance connected that even with developing the idea of Sullivan County being so intertwined with manufacturing, many people still have the perception of manufacturing as a low-skill job in an outdated environment. While manufacturing practices have changed since World War II when the Precision Valley was at its peak, the perception has not kept pace.

Others in attendance said that the region has a reputation for having weak schools. Claremont Planning Board member and former School Board member David Putnam said that the schools themselves are generally not weak, but the populations they support often do not have access to high quality preschool programs that develop intellectual faculties at a young age.

Another topic that arose repeatedly was the challenge of finding jobs that pay a living wage. But even that idea was modified as attendees noted that many of the jobs paying a living wage in the area go unfilled.

“I think there are jobs, but we need to find people who are able to fill them,” Vinduska said.

SAU 43 Superintendent Cindy Gallagher said that there is a sizeable number of young people in the area who have developed problems with drugs and are unable to qualify for many of the available jobs. County Commissioner Jeff Barrette proposed developing underemployed populations in the area.

To fill some of the open jobs, Rep. Ray Gagnon proposed supporting legislation that would bring more immigrants to the county.

At the outset of the meeting, UNHCE facilitators asked participants to begin thinking about the next steps in addressing some of the issues brought forth. At a later date, participants will have the opportunity to begin task forces to discuss and address the specific issues and propose solutions.