

## Development plan targets agriculture, health care

MAUREEN PICHÉ *The Telegram* | Posted: Friday, September 26, 2014 12:46 am

MALONE — Franklin County may be strong in government- and health care-related jobs, but to thrive in the future, it needs to develop entrepreneurs, capitalize on tourism and develop more biotechnical clusters between public, private and higher education sectors, according to the preliminary findings of an economic development firm hired to produce the county Industrial Development Agency's Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy.

The second of two public meetings was held Thursday in Malone to give details on what information has been gathered to date, and to get feedback from the community. Only a handful of people attended, including members of the IDA CEDS steering committee.

Camoin Associates, the firm hired to conduct the study, gave a presentation to outline the five "relevant clusters" of economic development in the county: agriculture and food processing; environmental science and biotechnology; forestry and wood products; health care and wellness; and tourism, culture and recreation.

"Those are the five clusters that we felt had a big impact on Franklin County's economy, either currently, historically or there's potential in the future as an emerging cluster," said Rachel Selsky, Camoin senior economic development specialist.

The last CEDS was completed in 2005 and expired in 2009, so a new one was needed to keep the county on plan and eligible for certain federal grants.

"Having a comprehensive economic development strategy that's acceptable to the [U.S.] Economic Development Administration is critical for applying for certain infrastructure projects and certain economic development projects," said IDA CEO John Tubbs.

"We will be identifying priority projects and helping to implement those priority projects for the sake of the economic vitality of Franklin County," Tubbs added. "Those projects do not receive funding per se from any specific source, but if some of those projects are referenced, especially prominently, in the plan, and we go for Economic Development Administration funding for any of those, we can point to the fact that it's critical for the county, it's already referenced in the plan, it's commonly accepted within the county that it's important and therefore we stand a better chance of getting funding for that."

Selsky pointed out that agricultural jobs are actually on the decline nationwide because of increased automation of equipment, but dairy exports and breweries are on the rise. In Franklin County, there has been a decrease in the crop production employment sector, but the value of crop sales has increased since the last agricultural census. The lack of processing facilities, such as slaughterhouses, is a major challenge for food producers, she said.

One of the ideas Selsky put forth as a way to support farmers as well as the tourism industry was agritourism.

Robert Camoin, CEO of Camoin, said a great example of environmental science/biotechnology in the county is the Saranac Lake-based Trudeau Institute's recent partnership with the state and Clarkson University to create a biotech research and development facility. He suggested more of those kinds of ventures are needed here.

“The idea is that it leads to the commercialization of some sort of innovation or product,” he said.

Employment has declined since 2003 in the forestry and wood products sector, Selsky said. The lack of saw mills and other processing facilities has a major impact on the industry’s ability to grow. She noted, in many cases, raw products from here are sent to Canada for processing and then repurchased from Canada.

One initiative she suggested was incorporating some wood products as part of a “Made in Franklin County” buy-local campaign highlighting craftsmanship and targeting markets that aren’t just looking for the cheapest products, but the most sustainable and well-made.

Having access to technology is critical to sustaining and growing health care and wellness jobs in the county, Selsky said. The industry accounts for 14 percent of the county’s employment and is a “major driver of the economy,” she said. But it faces challenges, not only with a rapidly growing aging population in the north country, but also an aging work force that causes the industry to struggle to find replacements for retiring employees. “There’s just not enough supply to meet the demand for the entry-level positions,” Selsky said.

It will be vital to develop programs for “trailing spouses” of health care workers so that they can find work in the area as well, and won’t be forced to leave to find employment, she said.

Wellness travelers and adventure travelers account for a growing number of people who could support tourism, culture and recreation in the county, Selsky said. “Travelers are looking for a real authentic and distinct experience, so not just a cookie cutter. They’re looking to experience something and have excursions and really dive into the community that they’re visiting,” she said.

There’s also a need for more modern lodging options to encourage people to stay over. And there’s a demand for guided tours available to people with a wide range of skill sets.

Selsky said the revitalization of the Hotel Saranac will help a great deal with the need for new lodging.

She said tourism has been looked at in terms of getting the most out of all four seasons. A golf course could be used for cross-country skiing in the winter or a ski mountain could be used for mountain biking in the summer. Entrepreneurism in these areas should be encouraged, she added.

One of the vital economic goals, she stressed, is to change the entrepreneurial climate in all aspects in the county. Small business is responsible for more job growth in the current economic climate.

“This is based on really changing the mindsets of residents from young to old about the opportunities around creating your own jobs, creating your own business -- the opportunities that there are to stay here in Franklin County and create jobs,” she said. “There’s not only government and health care, but there’s opportunities all over the place.”

The firm is at stage two of the CEDS process. Next, they will be working on an action plan matrix with specific goals, steps to be taken and measurements. They’ll also be creating the draft economic development strategy -- the full document that contains all of the information from the work that they’ve done. The final product will be ready for a public meeting in early December, Selsky projected.