



Input came from all sectors at the Community Forum sponsored by GREAT in Groveton over the weekend. Speakers clockwise from top left include, Elaine Connary, who urged the town not to be too proud to accept help. She told of a community in Arkansas that has offered help in the way of food to the families who will lose income from the closing of the Wausau mill. Steve Collins asked lawmakers to help people who want to start their own ventures cut through the red tape that would hold up the process. Holly Fortin, the branch manager of Passumpsic Bank in Groveton gave advice that people should communicate with their banks about the tough times ahead, while Union 61 officer Brian Bresnahan called for changes in education to keep the young people in town by equipping them with skills in building trades and hospitality based industry. Brenda Dowst, who facilitated the event is a GHS alum whose father, Dick Sheltry, worked in the mill, and Littleton businessman Jeff Brammer offered ideas on small businesses that he believes would be successful in the area. (Photo by Edith Tucker)

Brainstorming forum elicits questions, ideas

Residents ask for help from officials

By Melissa Grima

GROVETON — Concern and cautious optimism for the future were prevailing attitudes among those who participated in the community forum held at St. Francis Hall on Saturday. The event, which was organized by GREAT (Groveton Regional Economic Action Team), was designed to allow townspeople and workers to share ideas, feelings and concerns regarding the recently announced closure of the Wausau Paper mill. The mill employs more than 300 workers and has been a central fixture of this working class town of

around 2,500 people for more than 100 years.

Mill workers, citizens, politicians, special service and non-profit groups, and members of the media were among the 76 people who turned out for the 9:30 a.m. forum facilitated by Brenda (Sheltry) Dowst of the Mountain Spirit Institute of Sunapee — a group that helps facilitate public dialogue to create sustainable communities. Ms. Dowst had a special interest in the session as she is a 1962 graduate of Groveton High School and her father Dick Sheltry worked at the mill. “I grew up here and it means a lot

to me,” she said.

An open mike with an invitation for anyone to share thoughts and ideas brought plenty of conversation from all sectors, both public and private. With representatives from state and federal lawmakers on hand to listen participants put their ideas out there. Some, like Groveton resident John Roberge, blamed national policy for the mill closing. He criticized the NAFTA and CAFTA trade agreements for making American workers “expedient.”

“In order to change what’s happening in Groveton, we need to

change our trade policies in this country. Otherwise, it’s only going to get worse,” he told the crowd.

Others offered insight into what they hope to do personally to recover. Steve Collins of Maidstone — who, like nearly all of the other local people who spoke, comes from three generations of papermakers — said he hopes to start his own business. Mr. Collins said his plan is to open a campground on land he owns in Northumberland. “It’s okay to look for help, but you also need to be looking for what you can do

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Wausau says bargaining is over

By Edith Tucker

GROVETON — Local 61 of the United Steelworkers, most of whose 250 members will lose their jobs on Dec. 31 when the Wausau mill is shuttered and the rest by May 2, 2008, when the mill is totally emptied of workers, are pressing to have their severance package beefed up, but Wausau’s executive vice-president of administration said on Friday that bargaining has been completed.

At the end of ‘effects’ bargaining, union workers were offered four weeks’ pay by Wausau’s corporate administrators if they have worked at the mill for up to 10 years; eight weeks’ pay for up to 20 years; and 12 weeks for over 20 years.

Health insurance coverage would continue as long as a worker is receiving severance payments and he or she kicks in his or her employee share.

“This was not effects bargaining; it was effects begging,” Local 61 president Murray Rogers complained shortly before a Thursday morning press conference in union hall.

Management’s story puts a different slant on these negotiations, however.

Wausau’s executive vice presi-

telephone interview from his Milwaukee, Wis., office that he had been in Groveton for the effects bargaining which, he said, was an authentic bargaining situation, which has been concluded.

Workers eligible for retirement or now retired will receive their pensions and expected medical benefits, Mr. Carlson said, and those with enough years will be guaranteed they are vested in the pension system. Eligibility will be stretched to partial years, he said, so that someone with, say, 19 years, two months of covered employment will be allowed to count it as though it were 20 years. Past agreements on pensions, and retiree medical coverage will be honored. Those out on disability after the shutdown will continue to be covered as though Wausau was still on hand. Workers who have depended on using company-owned tools will be able to take a toolbox out of the mill that would allow them to continue to use their skills on another job, Mr. Carlson explained, even though technically these are company property.

He denied that any kind of “bargaining” took place but that these negotiations, like those in the past, were characterized by both “ad-

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for yourself,” he said. His concern in starting his own business is the red tape in the permitting process. Tales from other property owners in town about long waits for wetlands permits — in one case up to seven years — has him worried about getting his business up and running, he said.

Local landowner Sandy Gagnon, who works in human resources at the mill, also asked that the government help alleviate the obstacles. She said her mother had been a legislator and felt there was a definite lack of interest in the southern part of the state for North Country projects.

“There’s like a granite curtain that separates the north and the south,” she said. She said that she and her husband live on the Potter Farm, which is also the site of Fort Wentworth. They have been talking about opening up that piece of history, and she also asked the legislators for help to cut through the red tape. “We’re not asking for charity. We’re asking for help,” she said.

Later in the meeting, Executive Councilor Ray Burton (R-Bath) took the mike and addressed the concerns specifically. Councilor Burton promised to help Mr. Collins cut through the red tape. “Steve, I want your wetlands permit number,” he said. “We’re going to build that thing.” He explained that although they couldn’t break laws to get things done, the politicians there could certainly help expedite things to get people to work.

Many of those who spoke offered ideas to change the way the community has traditionally operated. GREAT vice-president and the only town selectman in attendance at the session, Rob Larson, said he believes the process of change will be easier than in a larger community because of Groveton’s size. “(It’s) easier to turn a small boat than a big ship,” he said.

A call for the entire area to start thinking of itself as one community — “The Community of Coös — came from Norman Charest, the Economic Development Director for Berlin who also works with Tri-County CAP and is co-chair of the Coös Economic Development Corp

(CEDC). “If we don’t unite we’re going to go down individually,” he said, pointing out that the region as a whole has suffered due to mill closures in Berlin and Groveton and could see another mill closure with the Fraser paper mill in Gorham in coming years. “The last shoe hasn’t fallen,” he predicted. Mr. Charest said that he also came from a family of papermakers, and his daughter had been employed by the Wausau mill.

Groveton resident Nancy Merrow agreed that a change in thinking is in order. “I think the thing that we have got to realize... this is time for the infamous words ‘paradigm shift,’” she explained, noting that the town needs to shift its focus from relying solely on one large employer and one large taxpayer and move ahead.

A number of people suggested that displaced workers look into becoming entrepreneurs using local resources to springboard their businesses.

“I think we need to use our local resources,” said Groveton resident and GREAT member Laurie Crawford. Ms. Crawford said that she thinks the Connecticut River is a great tourism resource and natural areas like Bag Hill could be used to the area’s advantage.

Littleton businessman Jeff Brammer offered his insight and told the crowd that there are opportunities in restaurant and grocery supply in the area, especially in organic farming, home delivery or business delivery. He encouraged the crowd to familiarize themselves with the Internet to get a leg up. “The markets are out there,” he said.

Brian Bresnahan a union officer with the Local Steelworkers #61, had a different take on what was needed. He noted the lack of youth in the crowd and stressed the need for educational programs to be adjusted to the area. He said the schools should offer craft education in the building trades, hospitality, and culinary arts so that young people can stay in the area with good paying jobs.

Along with earlier ideas to expand tourism-based business, Mr.



At the Community Forum in Groveton on Saturday, Don Langlois questioned how many local jobs would be created by the construction of the new federal prison in Berlin.

(Photo by Edith Tucker)

Larson mentioned an increase in eco-tourism that could lead to growth. He told the group that there are people who live in cities who will pay to work on a farm for the weekend. The value for them is in an experience they would not be able to get otherwise. “You’ve got natural resources they don’t have,” he noted.

In the meantime, Mr. Charest said that some mill workers should look to the construction jobs brought to Berlin with the new federal prison project as possible means of employment. His CEDC colleague Peter Riviere of Lancaster said, that projects are underway to help woo new businesses to the area, including improved rail, high-speed Internet and cellular services. Along with those efforts, GREAT member and former Groveton Town Clerk Becky Newton said that there are a lot of good things on the horizon. She told the crowd that the Women’s Rural Entrepreneurial Network (WREN) is opening up opportunities in the area, and outlined programs like the newly formed revolving loan fund, a grant made available by Job Lot, and a consultant from the Main Street Program who will evaluate the downtown.

Additional efforts were outlined by DRED representative Beno Lamontagne said that all the state’s resources were being put into creating jobs in the North Country. He specifically shared information on his recent and upcoming visits to the “manufacturing mecca” of Victoria, Quebec, where a team from New Hampshire is looking to

Strength of community is town’s biggest resource

Paper tablets were laid out for townspeople and workers to share their ideas and feelings about the closure of the Wausau Mill and the future of the town at Saturday’s Groveton Community Forum. Each section of paper was given a word to spur comment from the participants to write their “feelings,” and “needs,” while also asking them to identify what they saw as “barriers” and “resources” to the overall situation.

Some people left only a word, some put entire sentences and while some looked for answers to vague ideas, others had clearly defined what they believe needs to be done.

In the feelings arena, optimism was outweighed by those frustrated with this fresh blow to the community, but people were quick to identify some realistic needs and took pride in listing the strength of the community as the town’s biggest resource. Writers showed that they clearly recognized it would be only through the hard work of citizens that the town could move

forward, and when it came to list the barriers to the town’s success in overcoming this setback, the single repeated theme was again the townspeople and their mindset.

Here’s what they wrote:

Feelings

- Disgruntled
- Helpless
- Sad
- Extremely upset
- Hopeless
- I feel this is a blessing in disguise
- I feel we can bring this town/area to a new level

Needs

- Financial help with heating oil/taxes
- Public transportation for people working in Berlin, Whitefield, Littleton, Colebrook, etc.
- Answers to our future
- Financial help
- Fixed interest loan for 15 years for employees and businesses

Security

- More businesses to keep my people working
- A million dollars

Resources

- Our strength is in numbers
- Our people are strong and courageous
- Our strengths are our people
- Strengths through thought
- I’m so proud of you
- Rising to the challenge to move forward
- Community closeness is a strength

Barriers

- Our obstacles are not too great to be overcome
- Will be if we don’t work together
- Fearing change instead of embracing it. A new journey starts with the first step
- Our obstacles are our own minds
- If you can think it you can do it
- A huge obstacle is that people do not put their petty vendettas aside to work together. Only by working together can we succeed.
- Ourselves not getting up and moving forward.

entice Canadian companies looking to expand to consider the North Country. “They want that work ethic,” he said. Along with the local workforce’s reputation for dedication and hard work, he said the lack of sales and income taxes help draw the interest of companies being “taxed to death,” Mr. Lamontagne said.

As the discussion wound down and folks prepared to break into smaller brainstorming sessions, answers to some needs for assistance came from all corners.

Mr. Charest said that Tri-County CAP would be available with fuel assistance this winter. Cards with phone numbers for the state agencies involved in this process — including the Governor’s cell phone number — were passed out to all in

attendance. Rep. Bill Remick (R-Lancaster) said that he would continue his efforts in Concord to make sure Groveton gets the additional education grants it needs to keep education costs realistic, while Holly Fortin, the manager of Passumpsic Bank in Groveton, said all the banks are working on ways to help people who have outstanding loans. Ms. Fortin said the key to staying on top of the loans is for people to talk to their bank before they are in trouble so they can work together.

In all of the efforts moving forward the main theme was that the participation of the community would be key in whether the projects undertaken by outside agencies succeed. GREAT secretary Charlotte Sheltry made an open

plea to everyone present to stay involved in the discussion and volunteer to help in any way possible. “We need you to help us so we can help you further,” she said.

An open meeting of economic development minds was set to talk about the short-, mid-, and long-range goals for the area at 2:30 p.m. at Carter Hall on Nov. 13.

A roundtable discussion between local state and union officials and federal authorities will be held on Nov. 19 at 4 p.m. in the GHS cafeteria. The public is welcome. The meeting will include Sen. John E. Sununu, who will moderate the meeting, representatives from the Dept. of Labor and Dept. of Commerce, and representatives from Senator Judd Gregg’s office and Rep. Paul Hodes’ office.