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St. John Valley Creative Economy Project

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Final Report

St. John Valley
Creative Economy Project

*Strengthening Our Communities and Economy
Through Culture and Place*

Sheila Jans, Kathryn Hunt, and Caroline Noblet

*Prepared for the Margaret Chase Smith Policy Center
University of Maine, August 2010*

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Over the past two years, a team of researchers from the Margaret Chase Smith Policy Center at the University of Maine conducted an in-depth assessment of the St. John Valley's creative economy in collaboration with the University of Maine at Fort Kent and regional community leaders.

The St. John Valley, locally known as “the Valley,” is a rural, bilingual, and international region in Aroostook County at the northernmost tip of Maine, bordering the Canadian provinces of New Brunswick and Québec. Originally settled by the Acadians and Québécois, today the region boasts a rich heritage and pristine rural landscape – fertile ground for a distinctive creative economy. At the same time, like many rural regions across the United States, the Valley faces serious challenges, including the decline of traditional, resource-based industries, outmigration, an aging population, and a lack of diverse entrepreneurialism. There is a great need for more creative and innovative approaches to development.

The St. John Valley Creative Economy Project responded to this need. While there are many definitions of the term “creative economy,” the research team focused on the region's arts, cultural and place-based assets and how these indigenous factors could be better leveraged for economic development and growth. This report provides a summary of the activities, the output of research, and recommendations and conclusions based on project efforts.

The project included:

- Focus groups and interviews with residents to discuss their perceptions of the region's strengths, weaknesses and future;
- Interviews with youth to explore the same;
- Surveys of visitors attending four major Valley cultural events to gain demographic information, and to inquire what was enjoyable, or missing from their visit;
- Data collection, during summertime, at most of the region's museums to assess the attendance level and demographics of visitors;
- A mail survey of artists and creative entrepreneurs to assess their business development needs;
- A review of rural models of cultural development as well as existing state/county/local resources that could be better leveraged within the Valley; and,
- Focused conversation between the two university campuses on how to achieve greater collaboration, particularly in the areas of tourism development and entrepreneurship curricula and programs.

Through the methods above, we connected with a wide range of people in the region, including artisans, entrepreneurs, farmers, designers, business and community leaders, and students. Each individual gave generously of his or her time and shared perceptions of the region's assets, challenges, needs and future.

Clearly, the people we engaged believe that culture and place are the region's primary assets and are underdeveloped assets for prosperity. The individuals who participated in this project were cognizant of both the opportunities and challenges ahead. Many of the key assets they recognized also were identified as key challenges. For example:

- The people we heard from recognize the Valley to be a distinct region steeped in traditions. The Acadian, Québécois, Scots-Irish, and Native American heritages are kept alive and celebrated through a variety of ways, including cultural tours, genealogical research, historical preservation, festivals, community gatherings and various folk expressions. At the same time, the exodus of

young people from the region and the lack of resources threaten the continuation of many of these traditions. Many participants expressed discontent that French, spoken as a first language for many people in the region, is seriously eroding and at threat of being lost.

- From our surveys we learned that many of the region's traditional, world-renowned crafts are carried on by individuals who, due to a variety of challenges, can only do so as hobbies or as supplementary sources of income. Their skills are passed down to younger generations more often by happenstance than plan. And, the Valley's physical distance from markets that have the willingness and ability to pay for quality craftsmanship decreases not only the opportunity for increasing incomes, but also the recognition and esteem due to fine artisans and creative entrepreneurs when their work and services are fully appreciated by the marketplace.
- From our data collection we learned that in one summer over 10,000 people visited historical museums and cultural centers in the Valley. They came from all over the United States and world. Many of the visitors attending cultural events in the region expressed a desire to return again to partake in other experiences the Valley has to offer. At the same time, however, they also told us they found the region's hospitality and lodging below par. They wanted better restaurants and more amenities (and some indicated that they found what they desired just across the border in Canada).
- Participants believe that there is great potential for economic development as a result of being situated on the international border, but that it is not being fully explored. At the same time, participants consider the region's proximity to Canada as an obstacle. With the international border there is restriction and fear, sharing of resources and information is not well developed, and the casual interface of people from both sides is diminishing. There is a strong and enduring connection to Canada, especially to the Valley's direct neighbors – the provinces of New Brunswick and Québec.
- Not one of the individuals participating in the project disputed the beauty of the landscape. Regardless of season, the St. John Valley is a place where visitors and residents alike enjoy being outdoors and having opportunities to experience real wilderness. At the same time residents are very aware of being "at the end of the road" and the increased border restrictions since September 11 have only heightened residents' feelings of isolation and disconnection. Moreover, while the roads are not crowded, because of its geographic location, getting into and out of the Valley can be a formidable challenge, which dampens tourism and even frequent visits home from sons and daughters who have moved away.

The individuals we engaged in the project voiced each of these dueling sentiments repeatedly. These sentiments and others are elaborated upon in sections 3 and 4 of this report, which detail what we learned and our recommendations.

Despite their realism, however, every one of the residents we engaged voiced optimism about the future. While it was not within the scope of the project to articulate a vision of the Valley's future, the participants painted a compelling picture that included a more well-developed infrastructure for four seasons tourism, additional venues for fine artists and artisans to display and sell their work, further investment in cultural organizations and festivals, and niche farming that could be translated into culturally relevant goods and services.

But they were also clear: achieving this vision will not happen in piecemeal fashion or by towns acting independent of one another. When asked about what was needed, at the top of the list was regional leadership and cooperation among towns. In addition, they identified the need for regional investment

strategies that support entrepreneurship and microenterprise business growth, direct technical assistance for creative entrepreneurs in many aspects of business development, and cooperation in the marketing, sale and distribution of goods.

The participants also recognized that longer-term strategies, such as mentoring and education, are part of the work ahead. They aspire for a region rich in mentoring for young artisans with funded apprenticeships and other formal mechanisms for making this happen. They dream of a region where the creative and sustained application of the French language is possible in school, community venues, and the built environment. They see diverse entrepreneurialism springing from the commitment of higher education to providing education in entrepreneurship and innovation, and small business incubation.

In sum, they desire a place that is recognized not only for its cultural authenticity and distinctness, but also for being a region that has built prosperity from the celebration and expression of a vibrant creative economy.

The report on the St. John Valley Creative Economy concludes with four major recommendations to guide the road ahead. They are:

1. Build regional leadership, identity and collaborative capacity.
2. Strengthen programs and assistance to entrepreneurs and nonprofits.
3. Invest in the region's creative assets.
4. Cultivate pride in culture and place.

Finally, a note from the authors: our hope is this report will be used as a catalyst for translating data into regional planning that leads directly to concrete actions. Our starting position was clear: culture and place not only improve our quality of life, but constitute a foundation for building new business opportunities and a prosperous future for the communities of the St. John Valley. We are confident that the many challenges revealed in this project can be transformed into opportunities with a pledge to thinking and acting regionally. Progressive and insightful policies, for example, will contribute to long-term development; cultivating a creative mindset will be essential.

The assets upon which the St. John Valley has to build are largely indigenous, renewable and sustainable. Perhaps the lifelong Valley farmer, Aurelle Collin said it best, "Every village has all the talents of the world." With a commitment to dialogue, creative planning, focused leadership, and an active pursuit of the recommendations, the St. John Valley is certain to realize its creative economic potential through culture and place.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

*A century ago Maine's asset was falling water. Then it was cheap labor.
In the future, the place itself will be the economic asset.*

– Angus King, Former Governor of Maine

In May 2004, close to 700 people convened at the Bates Mill in Lewiston, Maine for the first Blaine House Conference on the Creative Economy. Prior to the conference, more than 1,000 people participated in planning sessions held all over the state. The event and the grassroots engagement leading up to it generated enormous excitement and spawned local and regional efforts in virtually every region of Maine to strengthen the creative economy.

To sustain statewide momentum, Governor John E. Baldacci established the Creative Economy Council in May 2005 and charged the council with developing recommendations for strengthening the state's creative economy, including strategies for fostering regional grassroots efforts.¹ The St. John Valley Forum on the Creative Economy took place just two months later and the project summarized in this report is a direct outgrowth of the participation in the forum.

By 2007, GrowSmart Maine issued the *Brookings Report*, which introduced the term “Quality of Place.”² Quality of Place refers to those characteristics of a community or region that make it distinctive from other places and attractive as a place in which to retire, work, or visit. Maine possesses a globally known brand based on its reputation for hardworking people and the state's many lifestyle amenities. A Quality of Place investment is one that preserves, strengthens, markets, and builds economic opportunity on the place-based assets, both natural and built that define the Maine brand.

These are the open, natural landscapes; traditional town centers and downtowns; historic structures and resources; arts, culture, and creative economy; working waterfronts; infrastructure and traditions that support and provide access to these; private and nonprofit efforts to build job opportunities based upon these as attractants; and workforce development efforts to take advantage of their employment-generating potential. The creative economy thrives when these elements are strong. The Governor's economic plan recognizes that it is important to invest in Maine's cultural heritage: “the economic engines that create opportunity are our youth, our creative workers, and our creative entrepreneurs.”

In 2008, the Governor's Maine Quality of Place Council was established. Research found that Maine's Quality of Place is an increasingly important economic driver, supporting high value jobs, products and services throughout Maine. In signing the Executive Order, Governor Baldacci said, “Maine's Quality of Place is about protecting, investing in, and enhancing Maine's competitive economic advantage. Expanding our efforts and building an investment strategy around our outstanding assets and qualities will grow Maine's economy now and in the future.”³

¹ The Council produced a final report for the Governor in 2006 called *Maine's Creative Economy: Connecting Creativity, Commerce and Community*. Creative workers are in all Maine industries, ranging from architects to engineers, researchers to artists, industrial designers to film editors, computer scientists to writers and musicians; 8.3% of Maine's workforce is defined as creative workers (close to 70,000 people). From 2000-2004, Maine's creative workforce grew by 9%, compared to 7% overall, adding about 5,500 jobs. For additional research: *The Creative Economy in Maine*, Richard Barringer et al, July 2004, Maine Center for Business and Economic Research, New England Environmental Finance Center and University of Southern Maine.

² The title of this report is: *Charting Maine's Future: An Action Plan for Promoting Sustainable Prosperity and Quality Places*.

³ The source for this section on Maine's Quality of Place is from print material produced by the Maine Quality of Place Council.

On a tous les talents du monde dans chaque village. ⁴

– Aurelle Collin, Lille

The St. John Valley, locally known as “the Valley,” is a rural, bilingual, and international region in Aroostook County at the northernmost tip of Maine, bordering the Canadian provinces of New Brunswick and Québec. There are approximately 15,000 people (85% of French heritage) in the twenty towns and townships that comprise the Valley.⁵ This region is considered the heart of the Acadians and Québécois who came to the shores of the St. John River in 1785.⁶ This was one territory, divided into two countries in 1842 when the dispute between the British and Americans was settled with the St. John River becoming the international border. Today, the Valley is where French is spoken daily, interwoven with English, and home to Native Americans, the Scottish, Irish, and many other people from around the world.

The Valley is renowned for its authentic and distinct cultural heritage, and also for its pristine waterways, plentiful forests, abundant wildlife, and rare flora. It is a land of short, cool summers and long, cold winters. The large network of rivers, lakes and wetlands feed the St. John River, the longest free-flowing river in the northeastern United States. Its banks are home to the greatest number and variety of rare and distinct plant species than any other place in Maine, second only to Mount Katahdin.

But like rural regions throughout the United States, the St. John Valley faces serious challenges, such as the decline of traditional industries, outmigration, an aging population, a lack of diverse entrepreneurialism, and an attrition of cultural traditions. The St. John Valley also experiences restrictive commercial growth as a result of being situated on an international border. Portions of the region fall within the Aroostook County Empowerment Zone, which has been characterized as a region with sparse population, severe winter weather conditions, a seasonal workforce of which close to three quarters lack a full-time job, and steady economic decline in its traditional manufacturing and commodity industries. Further, the region is challenged by a lack of substantial infrastructure and capacity for services, retail or accommodations, resulting in lost revenue opportunities as Valley residents increasingly rely on service centers outside of the region, spending fewer and fewer dollars locally.

Over the past decade, there have been numerous efforts to build new foundations for economic prosperity in the region. These efforts range from *Connexions Affaires* (Business Connections), a conference that focused on leveraging the French language for trade with French-speaking countries, to the Maine Winter Sports Center, which established a world-class venue in Fort Kent for biathlon and Nordic ski events.

Additionally, there have been projects to reveal and share the indigenous assets of the region. Publications like the *St. John Valley Welcome Guide*, the *St. John Valley Cultural Directory*, and *Traditions d'icite: The traditions of Maine's Saint John Valley* recognize and celebrate the relevance of culture, tradition, and place.

In 2003 an international assessment was conducted to determine the viability for an international cultural route between Maine and New Brunswick, which came to be known as the *Voici the Valley Cultureway*.⁷ The driving force behind the initiative was to give attention to the region's culture and landscape, and to tackle social issues such as a slow erosion of traditions, lack of understanding of the relevance of culture and place, and the attrition of the French language.

⁴ Every village has all the talents of the world.

⁵ In this report, we use the nomenclature of St., instead of Saint, for the St. John Valley. Our research considered the region as distinct, approx. 1,000 sq. miles from Allagash in the west to Hamlin in the east, Madawaska in the north to Eagle Lake in the south.

⁶ The use of the term “Acadian” in the Valley is commonly understood to include both Acadian and people of Québécois descent.

⁷ The international assessment was conducted by Sheila Jans as Senior Fellow with the Quebec-Labrador Foundation (QLF). CultureWorth created the Voici the Valley Cultureway in 2007 (sponsored by QLF and the Maine Acadian Heritage Council).

Other noteworthy efforts include ethnographic research by the National Park Service; creation of the Center for Rural Sustainable Development at the University of Maine at Fort Kent; and a range of annual ethnic and cultural festivals and events.⁸

As successful as these efforts are and have been, however, there is a great need for more strategic and sustained economic development. Such was the topic at the St. John Valley Forum on the Creative Economy in 2005, where almost 80 people convened to talk about working together as a region, identifying new opportunities, and considering alternative and more innovative approaches to development. At the forum, local leaders proposed that the region capitalize on its strongest, renewable, and inherent resources—its culture and landscape. The St. John Valley Creative Economy Project was a direct outgrowth of this forum.

1.2 The Project

Over the past two years, with funding from the United States Department of Agriculture’s Rural Development Agency, a team of researchers from the Margaret Chase Smith Policy Center at the University of Maine conducted an in-depth assessment of the St. John Valley’s creative economy in collaboration with the University of Maine at Fort Kent and regional community leaders.

While many definitions of creative economy are available, in this report, we use the term “creative economy” referring to two economic factors: (1) the importance of innovative and creative individuals in helping to create a prosperous and entrepreneurial rural economy; and, (2) the recognition of arts and cultural assets as more than contributors to quality of place, but as important new sources of job creation in their own right.⁹

Located at the very top of Maine, bordering the Canadian provinces of New Brunswick and Québec, the St. John Valley lies at the heart of the region originally settled in the 1700s by the Acadians and Québécois. Today, the region boasts a rich heritage and pristine rural landscape – fertile ground for a distinctive creative economy. At the same time, like many other rural regions across the United States, the St. John Valley is struggling to find new roads to jobs and prosperity.

This project responded to these unique circumstances. Its purpose was to:

1. identify opportunities for strengthening the region’s creative economy, specifically in ways that lead to new jobs and greater prosperity;
2. improve market information about visitors attending cultural and place-based events and museums in the region for the purpose of cultivating additional tourism opportunities;
3. learn from creative enterprises, including individual artisans, and entities supportive of their endeavors, as well as nonprofit groups, about their goals for business and organizational growth and the need for technical assistance;

⁸ Almost every town has its own historical society with a museum (16 museums of which 8 are national historic sites).

⁹ Essentially, anyone whose business is based on its knowledge, creativity and innovation belongs to the creative economy (artists, craftspeople, graphic designers, jewellery makers, woodworkers, furniture makers, artisans, food producers, musicians and performers, website designers, software developers, etc., and services such as consulting, sound production, event planning, or distribution). See appendix for definitions and more information on the creative economy.

4. explore ways in which the concepts and skills of innovation and entrepreneurship can be taught to students in the region, and
5. assess the leadership milieu for advancing creative ideas into action.

This report provides a summary of project activities, the output of research, and recommendations and conclusions based on project efforts. It offers concrete examples of actions taken elsewhere and an outline of potential next steps for translating the results of this report into action. The appendix includes additional information, including detailed reports of certain project components.

This report documents a unique project, which incorporated locally driven, and indigenously based planning processes for translating cultural assets into economic development and growth. Though culture is the primary focus of our research, place is inextricably woven into all aspects of culture, and thus, it figures highly in this project. Our hope is that this report will inform other regions looking to create similar roads to opportunity.

Most importantly, we view this report as an invitation to community leaders across the St. John Valley. The voice of the people of the region is strongly evident throughout these pages. We have strived to produce as comprehensive an analysis as possible, though by no means is our report exhaustive and definitive. It is meant to activate and stimulate conversation, and hopefully inform future planning and inspire action. We believe that investment in culture and place is key to building new business opportunities and a vital and prosperous future for the communities of the St. John Valley.

2. METHODOLOGY

The research team employed a range of research methods including, focus groups, interviews, surveys, and a review of best practices, models of development, and existing resources. Given the importance of this work to the community, and the extent to which this research relied on community engagement and involvement, the research team was attentive to the need to raise the level of awareness about the creative economy and this research effort.

A regional advisory committee informed the research activities, and the outcomes of specific surveys and data collection efforts were the subject of press releases and presented to cultural groups, chambers of commerce, town leaders, and legislative representatives. The University of Maine and the University of Maine at Fort Kent (UMFK) also provided web presence for this project.

Some of the research activities were completed in partnership with local organizations, such as the Center for Rural Sustainable Development at UMFK and the Northern Maine Development Commission. Additionally, research results were shared with state agencies seeking to promote development in the St. John Valley, such as the Maine Arts Commission and the Maine Department of Economic and Community Development.

We originally identified five primary activities to be completed during the course of the project. However, as the project unfolded it became evident that certain components of the original proposed activities would not be as fruitful as originally desired, and that other aspects of the St. John Valley creative economy required further investigation. Therefore, the final elements of the research included:

1. conducting focus groups and interviews with artists, creative entrepreneurs, youth, and regional leaders to determine their readiness for business development and their technical assistance needs;
2. conducting visitor intercept surveys at four major cultural/place-based events in the Valley (most held annually), including the winter-based North American Cup/U.S. National Biathlon Championship, and Can-Am Crown sled dog race, and the summer-based Acadian Festival and Tour de la Vallée bike race;
3. collecting cultural site visitation data, including data on the number of visitors attending cultural sites in the region, their point of origin, and operational details on the sites;
4. administrating a needs analysis survey in collaboration with the Northern Maine Development Commission; and
5. enhancing curricula, programs, and outreach mechanisms at the University of Maine at Fort Kent for fostering student innovation and regional rural entrepreneurship, through close collaboration with the University of Maine.

2.1 Focus Groups and Interviews

Focus Groups

The focus group component consisted of three sessions held over two days in August, 2008. Sessions were held in Fort Kent, Madawaska, and Van Buren. These three locations are considered the primary towns of the Valley, situated in the western, central and eastern parts of the region (and included communities surrounding each site location). Participants were selected based on geographic residence, profession, community engagement, and representation of a relevant organization and/or activity.¹⁰ Twelve individuals participated in the Fort Kent group, ten respondents participated in the Madawaska session and four participated in Van Buren.

The focus group sessions were intended to specifically address goals and readiness for arts and cultural-related business development and needs for technical assistance. The discussion was designed to identify possibilities to develop or expand creative activities, assess leadership capacity to sustain creative economic development in the region, obtain information on the factors that inhibit growth in this sector, and what resources are needed to break down these barriers.

The focus group sessions built on a 2003 international assessment of the St. John Valley to identify and document the integrity and quality of arts and cultural assets. Entitled the *Upper Saint John Valley Cultural Heritage Assessment*, its completion involved extensive interviews, data collection via secondary sources, and on-site assessments.¹¹ Further, the gap between cultural development and economic development is well documented and was identified as a key issue hampering rural development in a report published by the Margaret Chase Smith Policy Center entitled, *Maine's Creative Economy: Connecting Creativity, Commerce and Community*.¹² These focus group sessions supported what was one of several recommendations called for in *Maine's Creative Economy* to help close that gap.

Discussion in the focus group sessions was divided into four parts, corresponding to four sections of a series of questions on an overarching topic area:¹³ (1) assets and challenges of the St. John Valley as a business location, (2) obstacles to operating a business, (3) value of and type of regional planning and information needed, and (4) opportunities and obstacles for tourism development. Throughout these topic areas, participants openly shared their perspectives on current conditions in the Valley, as well as opportunities for the future. A summary of all focus groups can be found in the appendices.

Interviews

To complement the regional focus group sessions, fifteen one-on-one interviews were conducted over a three-month period. The first set of interviews included ten professionals (town managers, a selectman, chamber of commerce directors, an educator, a state legislator, two federal legislative representatives, and a financier). These participants were interviewed to gain more direct and personal insight about the assets, challenges, and opportunities for the region. Interviews were generally 1-1.5 hours in length.¹⁴

The second set of interviews included five young people¹⁵ in the region (one having been part of a focus group). Three were in their senior year of high school, one was living in southern Maine, and another was a first year student at the University of Maine at Fort Kent. Questions focused on gaining insight into what

¹⁰ Sheila Jans and the regional advisory committee informed the selection of participants based partly on the 2003 *Upper Saint John Valley Cultural Heritage Assessment*.

¹¹ Conducted by Sheila Jans, former senior fellow, Quebec-Labrador Foundation.

¹² This report is available from the Maine Arts Commission.

¹³ Working group and advisory group members informed the questions contained in the moderator's guide.

¹⁴ Interviews with professionals, regional leaders and youth were conducted by Sheila Jans.

¹⁵ The interviewees were between ages 18-25. In this report, however, we generally refer to young people as 18-35 years of age.

is important to them specifically, and to youth in general, about the St. John Valley. Interviews were about 40 minutes long and were conducted in person and by telephone. A summary of all interviews can be found in the appendices.

2.2 Visitor Intercept Surveys

One of the primary objectives of this project was to improve market information about visitors attending cultural and nature-based events in the Valley. Visitor intercept surveys were conducted by researchers and students at four events in the region from June 2008 to March 2009. The events surveyed include the Acadian Festival, Tour de la Vallée, Can-Am Crown, and the North American Cup/U.S. National Biathlon Championship. Overall, close to 500 attendees were surveyed (477, respectively n = 82, 92, 210, 93).

The surveys were designed to gain demographic, socio-economic, and attendee satisfaction data.¹⁶ They also included a section to assess missed opportunities – desired experiences or amenities identified by attendees that are not currently available in the region. The data gathered provides market details on event visitors. This information may be useful to event organizers to help focus marketing dollars, consider event activities that respond more directly to the demographics, or assist in identifying opportunities to expand the event. In order to maximize the impact of these findings, the completed reports were presented to event organizers and St. John Valley regional chambers of commerce. These reports can be found in the appendices.

2.3 Cultural Site Data Collection

In connecting with cultural entrepreneurs in the St. John Valley, researchers considered it important to consider the role that cultural sites in the region play vis-à-vis the creative economy. We added this component of data collection to better understand visitors attending cultural sites in the region, as they may relate to the market information gathered during the intercept surveys. A survey form was sent in the mail and electronically to 16 cultural organizations in July, 2008. Most of these organizations operate museums. In total 10 surveys were completed (with two sites providing limited information by telephone).

The data reflect visitor attendance from June to September of 2008 regarding the number of visitors to the sites, the visitors' place of origin, and when they visited (two respondents provided data for an additional two months). Additional information included background details on the site's operating hours, staffing and services. A summary of this information can be found in the appendices.

2.4 Needs Analysis Survey

In connection with our qualitative focus group findings we required more in-depth, quantitative data about the needs and status of the creative workers in the region (such as income levels, training needs, market information, services provided, and so on). To obtain this data we collaborated with Northern Maine Development Commission (NMDC) to conduct a creative economy needs analysis. Through a direct e-mail letter, 135 artists, creative businesses, farmers, and cultural entrepreneurs were notified in January, 2009 about the survey.

Additionally, a press release was sent to the regional newspaper, public service announcements to the cable television stations, and chambers of commerce directly notified their members. People were given an option to complete the survey online (on the NMDC website) or to receive a print copy through

¹⁶ Development of the survey drew upon the collective expertise of the working group, faculty from UM and UMFK, and the local knowledge of the regional advisory group.

standard mail (the deadline was the end of February, 2009). Based on direct solicitation, 20% completed the survey.¹⁷ A summary of the results can be found in the appendices.

2.5 Enhance Curricula, Foster Innovation and Entrepreneurship

In recent years, the University of Maine has established a strong focus on student innovation and entrepreneurship, notably through the creation of the Foster Center for Student Innovation on campus, and the development of an interdisciplinary program of study called Innovation Engineering—a program available to students in all disciplines and across all colleges that is designed to teach them the skills and principles of innovation and inspire them to consider entrepreneurship as a viable career opportunity. The focus on entrepreneurship established by the Student Innovation Center is an excellent fit with the desire of regional leaders in the St. John Valley to encourage cultural and arts-based entrepreneurial endeavors.

Throughout the project period the University of Maine Foster Student Innovation Center (FSIC) partnered with the University of Maine at Fort Kent (UMFK) to increase UMFK's innovation and entrepreneur capacity. Faculty from the University of Maine traveled to UMFK to share course strategy with colleagues who will in turn begin offering innovation focused courses with St. John Valley region students. Plans also include sharing FSIC's informal workshops live and via video streaming.

¹⁷ The recipients of this survey were informed by extensive mailing lists from the project, CultureWorth, and the Northern Maine Development Commission.

3. WHAT WE LEARNED

The purpose of the St. John Valley Creative Economy Project was to investigate opportunities and challenges facing the region with respect to its cultural and place-based assets as contributors and drivers of economic prosperity in the region. Further, the project's intent was to begin a conversation on strengthening leadership capacity within the region and fostering a positive climate for youth retention and rural innovation.

We were able to connect with a wide range of people in the region – artisans, entrepreneurs, farmers, designers, community leaders, and students – about their observations on the region's strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities. They shared specific suggestions on what is needed to grow a more prosperous economy, and general thoughts on their hopes for a better place to live. We have outlined what we learned in two primary categories: assets and challenges, and needs and vision.

Some of the overarching findings indicate that residents of the St. John Valley believe the region itself is a strong and unique asset. Place matters. People generally believe that residents and visitors to the region have a positive rural experience. In fact, the two most commonly identified assets by people who live in the St. John Valley are inherent and renewable: culture and natural environment.

Though proud about the region's distinct culture and heritage, there is also widespread concern about losing it, as young people move away and/or do not carry forward the heritage traditions that are intertwined with place. Moreover, some feel that the region is not doing enough to safeguard the natural resources with insightful forest planning, for example.

There is also frustration over slow and difficult economic progress attributed to geographic isolation, long held territorial battles between communities, negative and conservative attitudes, lack of resources and infrastructure, and the double-edged sword of being situated on an international border. Not surprisingly, assets and challenges are inextricably bound, both carrying an ironic twist of opportunity and threat.

3.1 Regional Assets and Challenges

This community doesn't need to be manufactured – it's real.

– Rachele DeFarges, St. David

The St. John Valley has numerous strengths that can be leveraged to inspire innovation and creativity, retain and attract new entrepreneurs, and build prosperity. The following assets and concurrent challenges, all of which are indigenous to the region, have been identified through our research:

- a. French Language
- b. Tradition, Culture and Identity
- c. Natural Environment
- d. Community
- e. Proximity to Canada
- f. People
- g. Infrastructure

3.1.a French Language

It's a real loss that we're not supporting our French language more.

– Nicole Ouellette, Fort Kent

Though the Native Americans, Scots-Irish, and many other people from throughout the world make the St. John Valley their home, it is a predominantly Acadian and Québécois region. The French language is the mother tongue for most of the population, and with that comes a general recognition of its significance and the value of protecting and celebrating it.

Thanks to geographic “isolation” and an oral tradition continued by the people of the Valley, the French pronunciation and vocabulary retains aspects of 16th century France no longer spoken in that country today. The distinct character of its pronunciation and vocabulary draws the interest of linguists from around the world, numerous magazine and newspaper articles, studies, books, films, and documentaries. Regional efforts celebrate the language and cultural heritage like *Voici the Valley*, an audio cultural documentary and annual events like the Acadian Festival. Various entities such as Le Club Français,¹⁸ a regional nonprofit organization, and the Acadian Archives at the University of Maine at Fort Kent support the language through public programming.

Regional support for strengthening the French language include Le Club Français’ programs that offer financial incentives for local businesses to include French in their exterior signage. Additionally, the group also offers interior laminated paper signs to public and private establishments that indicate French is spoken there (*On Parle Français Ici*), serving not only the French-speaking people in the region, but also Canadian customers. Some towns have adopted bilingual street signs (such as Grand Isle) and include French in their town websites. There are also many private efforts that include the French language in various communications and signage for businesses or residences.

Leveraging the use of the French language as a tool for economic growth was the focus of an international conference called *Connexions Affaires* (Business Connections), held at the University of Maine at Fort Kent in 1998. The conference brought people from government agencies and private enterprise from both sides of the border to explore the potential for building economic prosperity precisely because of the French language. The fact that such a large part of the Valley’s population can function in French was undoubtedly a contributing factor for the Canadian led World Acadian Congress to include Maine in its 2014 event.

However, for the people on the U.S. side of the river, it has been a constant struggle to maintain their French language.¹⁹ An interviewee explains, “I don’t see the border as a barrier, but I can’t lie that it exists. The true barrier is the language; the French on the American side isn’t progressing like on the Canadian side.” Many factors have brought about this struggle, including Maine state legislation in 1919 that prohibited the use of French outside of French language class in schools and public agencies in the Valley.

Though the legislation was repealed in 1969, enduring damage was done to the esteem of the French-speaking people of the region. To this day, many apologize for their accents, their vocabulary and syntax of sentences. They sometimes hesitate to speak their mother tongue in public forums, keeping it only to family or community interaction. Even though the American side of the river is considered bilingual, many people feel their French comprehension levels and proficiency are inadequate.

¹⁸ Since completion of our primary research, it has been renamed Association Française de la Vallée St-Jean.

¹⁹ There is no official study of the diminishment of the French language on the American side of the river, though in his 1980s study on the French language (which included reference to the U. S. side of the river), Rodrigue Landry of the University of Moncton, indicated that within a generation the language is at threat of being lost.

Some residents who speak French feel less equipped to read and write French. This inconsistency has impacted the capacity for companies that require advanced French language comprehension levels to locate in the region.²⁰

Currently, the St. John Valley has no official regional position on the use of the French language, nor any position on how to safeguard and promote it. While entities like Le Club Français are “committed to preserving and promoting an environment for the French language to prosper for all people in the St. John Valley” and their programs have impact on the region, they remain a volunteer group with limited capacity to address the varied and urgent needs of the region. For any number of reasons, school administrators are unsupportive of sustained and full French immersion classes in their schools. No community in the Valley has adopted a proactive policy to safeguard the French language through bilingual signs, the use of French in communications, or how to leverage the language for trade and other economic development.²¹

3.1.b Tradition, Culture and Identity

Our historical societies are the gatekeepers to our future.

– Ryan Pelletier, St. Agatha

Many people who live in the St. John Valley consider they are *of* a people. They recognize that this is a distinct region steeped in traditions. The heritage is kept alive and celebrated through a variety of ways, including cultural tours, genealogical research, historic preservation, festivals, community gatherings, and various folk expressions.

The region’s nonprofit cultural groups (historical societies, museums, etc.) play a pivotal role in safeguarding the culture and traditions of the region. We learned that from May to September in 2008, over 10,000 people visited the sixteen museums (eight are on the National Register of Historic Places), cultural sites and centers of the region. This is remarkable given that most museums, operated by volunteers, are open only in the summer and have varied and limited hours. Visitors came from Maine, New Brunswick, Connecticut and other New England states, and as far away as Texas, California and British Columbia.

Traditions are also celebrated through annual events like the Acadian Festival in Madawaska or the Ploye Festival in Fort Kent and through publications like *Traditions d’icite*, *Christmas in Allagash: The Early Years*, and *Voici the Valley*, an audio documentary. Artisans keep traditions alive with the use of traditional materials and skills, such as the making of snowshoes, quilts and *catalognes* (blankets or runners). Traditional music is played at the annual Fiddlers Jamboree, the Acadian Festival and at occasional community gatherings like the *Soirées de Bon Vieux Temps*. Activities that keep traditions alive are part of a larger creative sector in the region that includes artists and creative enterprises of a contemporary nature, such as graphic designers, photographers, painters, musicians, jewelers, organic farmers, recording producers and so on.

We are separate but connected to Canada; we’re separate but connected to Aroostook County, we are separate but connected to Maine, and we’re separate but connected to the USA.

– Daniel Picard, Madawaska

²⁰ The lack of fluency was a determining factor for a call center to situate its business across the river in New Brunswick after its initial desire to locate on the Maine side.

²¹ Source: Sheila Jans, *Upper Saint John Valley Cultural Heritage Assessment*, 2003.

While having a distinct culture and being geographically distant from power centers have contributed to a strong sense of place, these same qualities have resulted in strongly held feelings of isolation – of being cut off from the rest of Aroostook County and the state – of being on one’s own – culturally, geographically, and economically.

There are pervasive contradictions: for instance, though culture is considered one of the most important assets of the region, it, along with the arts, is not considered a viable industry worthy of serious financial investment. Interviewees agreed that in principle, arts and culture are catalysts that stimulate community and economic development. But, because they are considered invisible in the St. John Valley and their promotion is primarily in the purview of nonprofits and social groups, they are not necessarily seen on par with traditional industries that generate employment and wealth. There is an unequivocal desire to preserve, retain, and sustain traditions and general cultural endeavors, but this desire does not always translate to strategic and formative action.

Much of the arts and cultural activities in the region are generated by nonprofit groups, which are operated almost completely by volunteers. Capacity is limited; nonprofits continually struggle to secure funding, expertise is lacking, and fatigue is high amongst volunteers who are challenged by managing an organization or sustaining a successful event. This leads to a state of inconsistency and vulnerability.

We need to consider arts and culture as a viable industry for the Valley.

– Don Guimond, Fort Kent

Concise information does not exist on the numbers of individuals and businesses producing goods or providing services in the creative sector in the St. John Valley.²² Generally, artists, artisans and creative entrepreneurs in the region do not consider themselves as part of an industry cluster. As a result, many feel isolated and lack the kind of technical assistance or financial capital required to advance their work. Many offer their work primarily at craft fairs or through limited networks, not selling enough to make a viable living. Not surprisingly, most artists rely on other sources of income to make ends meet.

There was recognition amongst research participants that many of the products produced in the Valley may not be desired by, or affordable to, local citizens but may sell well in premium markets that could be supported by increased tourism. Interest exists in the region to expand tourism not only as an economic driver, but also as an opportunity to educate visitors about the cultural heritage. For example, biathlon events taking place in the Valley attract people from around the world, providing an incentive to showcase the region’s treasures. Additionally, participants expressed that a possibility may exist to capitalize on the St. John Valley’s shared Acadian culture, much like portions of Louisiana have done with their shared Cajun ancestry. There is currently no broad name recognition associated with “Acadian” and participants expressed interest in changing that.

It’s difficult doing business in the Valley because it’s so small.

We’re just not doing enough to promote ourselves so we can sell to a larger population

– Cliff Cyr, Madawaska

Many of the research participants were small business owners engaged in the production of arts, crafts, cultural wares or handmade products (some produced with Acadian traditions in mind). These small entrepreneurs indicated that one of the overwhelming barriers faced by many artisans was the expense and expertise needed to sell their product in larger markets.

²² This collection of data was not within the scope of our regional needs analysis survey. Additional data on the creative economy is available in the *Aroostook County Creative Economy Needs Assessment Survey Analysis* produced by the Northern Maine Development Commission.

Due to the small size of the St. John Valley consumer market, regional businesses need to tap outside markets in order to be successful. Artisans and business owners found it difficult to sell their products in other areas of the state due to the travel expense associated with reaching larger markets. Many of the artisan products are best suited for tourism markets, however Maine's primary tourist areas are four or more hours by car from the region. Additionally, participants indicated that they felt Maine's tourism focus was attracting visitors from the eastern seaboard of the United States and there was limited interest in attracting tourists from north of our borders.

Participants indicated that currently there was limited flow of St. John Valley products to larger markets in part because most artisans attempted to sell or provide their products to these larger markets on their own, with limited coordination amongst producers. These small businesses have difficulty affording not only all of the supplies for the business, but the marketing required for sales and the travel expenses associated with selling their products to larger markets (e.g., craft fairs in other parts of the state).

While many participants indicated that the Internet would be a wonderful tool for expanding their customer base, they indicated that the majority of entrepreneurs in the area lack the expertise, and financial ability to place their products online. Those participants who utilized the Internet as a sales tool identified a number of barriers that entrepreneurs face. First, businesses typically must pay for products to be appropriately placed in search engines. Second, the time expense was also prohibitive for many small businesses in that entrepreneurs found it overly time consuming to create and maintain individual web pages, while continually updating links to appropriate pages for their product.

Participants also identified a barrier with respect to consumer knowledge regarding the arts, crafts and traditionally produced products that are created by Valley businesses (the local prejudice is that if something is made here, it is not good). Many participants indicated that local consumers are often unable to discern the quality differences between, for example, a hand-loomed scarf and a mass-produced item.

The inability of the consumer to differentiate based on quality, and therefore refusal to pay a premium price for handmade or quality products, makes it difficult for many small entrepreneurs to continue producing their products for local sale, thus having to focus entirely on exterior markets.

We have kids here that are so incredibly talented, but we don't have enough to inspire and support them. So, they go off and compete in the rest of the world that supports the arts.

– Therese Provenzano, Wallagrass

Participants indicated that in conjunction with this lack of knowledge, there is a concern that the value of traditionally produced products, reflective of Acadian heritage, may be primarily appreciated only in the older generations. Thus, these products may not be attractive to younger consumers.

This loss of youth interest in cultural heritage was also disturbing to participants from a community perspective, as fewer young adults are choosing to stay in the community and produce these traditional or artisan-crafted products. Participants felt that the school curriculum in general also failed to emphasize arts and culture, which contributes to the lack of interest from the younger generation. Participants also indicated that the Valley is losing young residents and the youth audience for cultural products.

3.1.c Natural Environment

I came back to the Valley because where I was I couldn't breathe the air or see the stars.

– David Soucy, Fort Kent

Visitors often remark on (and residents are well aware of) the distinctiveness of the Valley, because of its geography and culture. It is a region that has managed to maintain its sense of identity and place. The combination of the beauty of the landscape and the community feeling has enabled development of relationships with certain groups of visitors, such as family reunions, cross-country skiers and dog-sledders. The region is part of the North Maine Woods, an enormous, forested area that attracts hundreds of people annually. Visitors who come for a particular event, like the Can-Am Crown for example, are also impressed by the region as a whole and are interested to return to experience the area besides the event. The region benefits from four defined seasons.

The enduring relationship people have with their natural environment shapes the Valley's sense of place. The St. John River and the interlocking rivers and lakes are the thread that connects the region and two countries.²³ Wildlife flourishes in the stretches of forest and wetlands. The countryside has been compared to the foothills of Switzerland, or the rolling landscape of Europe.

Spring brings *fougères* (fiddleheads), autumn offers hazelnuts, the harvest of potatoes, and the bright colors of leaves. Farming, a principal occupation in the past, concentrated on potatoes, oats, hay and buckwheat. Even though farming accounts for a minor percentage of how people make a living in the region today, it has remained a strong cultural identifier and has potential for growth (e.g., organic farming with specialized crops is becoming more popular). Nordic skiing is fast becoming a major activity, attracting people from throughout North America (e.g., the Maine Winter Sports Center in Fort Kent and the Four Seasons Trail in Madawaska offer Olympic level biathlon trails).

All of the eco-recreational activities contribute to making the St. John Valley a destination, and like the museums and cultural events, help to stimulate the economy. In fact, participants in all research applications considered that tourism (specifically place-based cultural tourism, which includes eco-recreational tourism) holds the highest potential for development of the region.

Geography and climate have an enduring effect on the people who live year-round in the Valley. The long, cold winters provide beauty and opportunity for outdoor recreation, but they also bring “cabin fever,” affecting people's enthusiasm, motivation and creativity. A common complaint is feeling closed-in, not only by the winter months, but by the actual geography of the river valley.

Geography has also dramatically affected how residents perceive themselves. A sense of self-sufficiency has grown out of a response to harsh climate, as well as the region's distance from seats of government and larger urban centers. The belief “there's nowhere to go; there's nothing to do” has a strong presence in the St. John Valley. Many feel the frustration that there are few outstanding dining experiences, retail options, or arts and performing venues within their own communities. They must travel, at times great distances, to gain these experiences. And with that travel, a monetary drain from the region occurs.

²³ In 2005, the St. John River Conference brought people from both sides of the border together to discuss a range of issues surrounding the river's watershed, from environmental protection to recreation and tourism. Organized by the Northern Maine Development Commission, it followed a similar conference held several years before, by the Quebec-Labrador Foundation.

3.1.d Community

We need to acknowledge that our way of life is positive and precious.

– Luis Sanclemente, Fort Kent

The St. John Valley's distinct and authentic cultural heritage and the residents' strong connection to land are only a part of what contribute to a strong sense of community. Participants of all research applications characterized the Valley as peaceful and safe – an ideal place to raise a family. The sense of security remains one of the most appealing qualities for residents of the Valley.

The family unit is strong in the region. There is a large community of professional and amateur genealogists publishing books and essays on family lineages, and the Valley is host to numerous family reunions, big and small, throughout the summer months.

Visitors often comment on well-groomed properties. The air is clean; there are no traffic jams, nor urban sprawl. The people are humble, independent, inventive, and known for their strong work ethic. And, residents know that others “are trying to get what we have here.” A professor teaching at the University of Maine at Fort Kent explained, “From the outside point of view, this place is exotic. For the U.S., [the general perception is that] Maine has a romantic aura about it – the Valley is even one more step beyond that.”²⁴

*I love this place. I want to bring more people here, get them to stay,
and love it as much as I do.*

– Noelle Dubay, Fort Kent

The young people we interviewed cited these same assets of community, family, culture, and the beauty and abundance of nature. For one high school student, having “no tricky roads” was an asset. They have a great desire to either remain in the region or someday return to it (after college). Their connection to the St. John Valley is rooted squarely on its peacefulness, wildness, safety, family, and authentic culture.

Though youth are conflicted about staying and facing the challenge of making a living versus leaving, they acknowledge that the Valley is a valuable place. A young person expressed, “It's the only place where I've been completely relaxed.” One student returned from the University of Maine (in Orono), because he missed the nature, open space, and family and felt he could get the same education within the region at the University of Maine at Fort Kent.

Some believe that major changes to the Valley will erode the current unique quality of life offered region, resulting from an influx of development projects, population, and recreational tourism. For instance, tourism may bring a welcome injection of visitor dollars, but with it, perhaps, more crime, pollution, damage to the land, and accidents on the road. For the natural environment, increased motorized access, such as snowmobiles and all-terrain vehicles, have already caused problems in the wilderness, such as erosion, destruction of wildlife habitat, and disharmony between animals, humans and machine.

Still, young people are also clear that the region lacks places to get together, different things to do, and a diversity of people. They know it is very difficult to make a living in the region but it is the lack of amenities that discourage them from staying or returning. As one young person explained, “I can live better in the Valley with the same amount of money I'm earning in Bar Harbor – but the reason I'm not in the Valley has to do with the lack of amenities.”

²⁴ Source: Sheila Jans, *Upper Saint John Valley International Assessment*, 2003

3.1.e Proximity to Canada

The Valley could become a global market because of our port connections to Canada.

– Thomas Cannon, Van Buren

There is a strong and enduring connection to Canada, especially to the provinces of New Brunswick and Québec, which are the Valley's direct neighbors. There is a paradox experienced by people who live in the international region of the St. John Valley: a life of common identity coupled with geopolitical disconnection. Nevertheless, they are inextricably linked through language, cultural heritage, history, and land. The fact that some people on the American side consider Canada home rather than the United States is testimony to the profound sense of attachment.²⁵

This sense of connection that Americans have for Canada shapes the region's unique sense of self and place. For the St. John Valley, its geographic location in the state and nation, is defining. It is usually coined a remote place, far from everything and every place – the end. The Valley may very well be at the “end” of Maine depending on one's perspective, but it is also at a beginning – part of the larger home of Canada.

Participants identified Canada as a primary asset for the St. John Valley. They believe that there is great potential for economic development as a result of being situated on the international border, but that it is not being fully explored. International events, such as the Can-Am Crown, the International Snowmobilers Festival, or biathlon-related activities and the upcoming World Acadian Congress, bring both sides of the border together. There is harmony, understanding and cooperation.

At the same time, participants consider the region's proximity to Canada as an obstacle. With the international border there is restriction and fear, the difference in French language comprehension can be discouraging, sharing of resources and information is not necessarily well developed, and the casual interface of people from both sides is diminishing.

Canadians hesitate to do business on the U.S. side, and Americans are also feeling frustrated to do business on the Canadian side. This is a problem unique to here by virtue of our geography and history.

– Don Cyr, Lille

Border communities have unique criss-cross economies with advantages and disadvantages for the consumption of goods and services. For example, depending on the currency value of the American and Canadian dollar, savings on goods and services can be substantial (e.g., in 2003 the value of the American dollar to the Canadian was 40%). Canadians experience more restrictions in terms of the amount of goods they can bring over after one day, while for Americans, all goods up to \$200 per day per person are allowable. This restriction to Canadian consumers inhibits the amount of funds that can freely enter the communities on the U.S. side of the border.

Most Maine residents know that it makes complete sense for their communities to do business with the Canadian side; and for Canadians, it is an incentive to have an American address and access to the larger American market. But the challenges, from border restrictions to differences in currency value, are discouraging. Growth of the region is linear, not circular.

²⁵ Source: Sheila Jans, *Upper Saint John Valley Cultural Heritage Assessment*, 2003.

Even though both sides agree that encouraging a fluid exchange is vital, the general perception is expressed by an economic developer in Van Buren: “It’s easy to say, but difficult to do.”²⁶

Participants indicated that it is difficult to cross the Canadian border with products for sale, and understanding the trade intricacies is prohibitively time consuming for many entrepreneurs (e.g., it is very difficult to bring artists and performers across from Canada). Some of the larger businesses of the region have begun to make arrangements and contracts for easier flow of products, but this option is typically not available to smaller entrepreneurs.

Many St. John Valley businesses also find themselves competing against Canadian firms for the business of Valley citizens as well as Canadian citizens. Further, even though French is spoken on the American side of the border, there are many people who are either not completely fluent or are unilingual English. This can inhibit a level of full engagement in communicating in French, which is the language of the majority in Québec and on the New Brunswick side of the border.

Finally, participants indicated that the new passport requirements further discourage cross-border activities. The border has become even more fear-based. They indicated that even within the state of Maine the geographic and cultural distinction which makes the Valley unique produces a conflict, making the region special, but also cut off from the rest of Aroostook county and the state. It stands isolated. Participants noted the challenges they face when seeking State support to help the region invest in doing business with Canada.

There is no doubt that there are unique complexities to a region where an international boundary is carved down its center. The border is a polarizing concept that dramatically affects the fluid movement of local residents and visitors, especially since September 11, 2001 and the installation of strict passport restrictions. One regional leader said, “At one time it was an asset to be next to Canada, but now it seems to make no difference. The U.S. made it difficult to travel back and forth and the amenities in Canada are better, so why [would Canadians] bother coming here?” For local residents, who live in the region the border is a constant reminder of how larger powers have control over their lives. A border creates an “us” and a “them.”

3.1.f People

La joie de vivre, creativity and resourcefulness of our people are manifested in our music, art and drama. We are rich!

– Judy Ayotte Paradis, Frenchville

People themselves are a vital asset that must be taken into account. A recurring attribute of the people of this region is a strong work ethic. In fact, Aroostook County as a whole is known throughout the state for its motivated and conscientious labor force. Perhaps this can be attributed to geographic and political isolation and the necessity for self-sufficiency.

As a result, there is a notable level of *patenteurs* – individuals who are demonstrably inventive and create solutions to every day challenges. This is very much part of the character of the people in the Valley. Though the population has seriously diminished since the 1960s, the desire to create, to participate, and

²⁶ Just the same, some businesses in the Valley have thrived with worldwide markets for their products. The former Aegis bike shop in Van Buren produced high quality competitive racing bikes, the only composite materials bike shop in the U.S. The Allagash Wood Products in Allagash creates handcrafted furniture with white cedar from the northern woods of Maine and sells it products online to clients in the U.S. and abroad.

shape their destiny is strong. Remarkably, two teenagers said they would want to return to the Valley to offer something unique and to protect the culture: “I can see myself coming back to offer something that doesn’t exist already.”

At the same time, there is also a collective low self-esteem of the people of the region that gets expressed in a variety of ways and is heard in self declarations such as “[we’re a] welfare drag on the state,” and “we’ve always done it that way, so why change.” People are stymied by territorialism between towns, lack of a diverse economy, border restrictions, the over-reliance on volunteers, a poor transportation system, and the large distances to markets. Arguably, this collective consciousness has contributed to a relative inattention to planning for future generations (attention to planning could lead, for example, to insightful town revitalization, creation of dining and cultural experiences, preservation of vernacular architecture, or adoption of protected zones for nature and culture). The “way of doing things” also discourages people who move to the region from other locations.

Young people aren’t leaving because they don’t want to stay – it’s just not viable to stay.

– Chace Jackson, Allagash

An aging, diminishing and undiversified population is one piece of the demographic challenges facing this region. Retaining and attracting youth is a consistent challenge. For young people, the primary drawback of the region relates to the lack of places to go and things to do. Many feel isolated with few opportunities and a concern to be able to make a viable living. They considered the region to be “old-fashioned”, out-of- step and disconnected with “what’s happening out there.” Young people are acutely aware of the pervasive negative attitude and the conservative restraint in investing in people and ideas. One high school student explained, “People are good at complaining. No one expects anything to work because if it didn’t work in the past, it won’t work now.” A regional leader expressed frustration that young people “get educated at the university, but move on.” Many young people want to stay in the region and contribute to making it a better place to live, however, they are often discouraged by negative, fatalistic attitudes.

So much of what is right and what works about the St. John Valley is because of its volunteers. Without them, organizations like the Maine Winter Sports Center, Four Seasons Trail, historical societies, and so on, would not exist. However, some think that volunteers are “cheap labor”, infighting is prevalent, efficiency and competency may be compromised, and burnout level is high. Further, volunteerism discourages investment in professionals – essentially, an overreliance of volunteers inhibits employment opportunities. A young professional explained, “It has its limits. We need more professionals doing work, and this would help with job creation.” For general community advancement, volunteer efforts are generally successful. Yet, the region is hard pressed to secure leadership at all levels to focus on larger development issues. Funds to hire professionals with skills in planning, development and public relations, are difficult to secure, which may reflect a region-wide perception that professions in these fields are not valued.

Cultivating and supporting an environment for people to succeed is about leadership. But bringing positive, transformative leadership to bear is confounded by long-standing rivalries and misconceptions about neighboring communities. A participant explained it this way, “We’re actually threatened by the very development we seek.” The Valley has its fair share of leaders and leadership potential, but is held back by an approach to development that is generally parochial. The disquieting characterization of the region voiced by the people we spoke with was one of safeguarding their own interests and welfare by sabotaging the means for others to have greater prosperity.

Outmigration continues to be a concern. People, who are born in the region or come from other areas, move away for a variety of reasons: better employment, desire for urban experiences, or education.

For whatever reason, the fact remains that the population is dwindling, which in turn affects local businesses, as well as local and outside investment for more substantial, long-term development. One participant asked rhetorically, “Now that there is access to things elsewhere and it’s easy to access, why bother buying locally?” By losing the population, not only is the tax base and potential for human resource adversely affected, so is the morale and motivation of the people who remain in the region.

Many artists and other homegrown talent consider it impossible to make a living in the region and they leave for urban centers. If they return to the region while still in their moneymaking years, their enthusiasm is frequently deflated by negative attitudes. In some cases, indifferences based on pedigree, trivial transgressions, or dismissive labels like “coming from away,” have become so firmly entrenched that the potential for positive growth is compromised.

Finally, the Valley has a seasonal workforce of which close to three-quarters lack a full-time job. There is simply not enough entrepreneurialism independent of primary employers. The reliance of a region dependent on one industry can be potentially devastating. For instance, in Madawaska, more than half of town taxes are allocated to the school system; Twin Rivers (formerly Fraser Pulp and Paper) offsets a large portion of these taxes, as well as employs a significant portion of the town’s population as well as surrounding communities. Remove this employer or seriously downsize it, and the viability of the entire area is at risk.

3.1.g Infrastructure

It’d be nice to see the Valley grow to the point that people don’t have to leave – they can make a healthy living and be secure with their families.

– Senator Troy Jackson, Allagash

While this project did not assess infrastructure in the St. John Valley, it would be remiss not to mention some of the clearly identified assets and challenges mentioned by research participants. The University of Maine at Fort Kent, for example, was identified repeatedly as a regional asset, not only providing higher education for the people of the region, but also contributing to its diversity by attracting students and educators from around the world. Numerous activities that engage the general public take place at the university, including exhibitions, performances and seminars. Still, some of the research participants expressed hope that the university would take further steps to contribute to building a vital creative economy in the region through targeted curricula and direct outreach.

Participants also cited more traditional assets, such as the Northern Maine Regional Airport in Frenchville, the trucking transportation system, and the railroad lines that run through all communities (many next to museums and town centers). But, participants also recognized that the lack of and/or under-utilization of these transportation options inhibits tourism, the inward migration of people and businesses, and even travel within the region by residents themselves. For example, bus routes do not reliably extend services to the Valley (a bus line serving the region presently operates, though its long-term survival is not clear) and there is no passenger rail service.

Many participants also felt that the lack of transportation infrastructure and options has contributed to the exodus of young people who find that once they leave, it is difficult logistically to return home, especially for weekends and short holidays. As a result, they do not visit often and begin to lose touch with their community. Ironically, just across the international border there is a four lane Trans-Canada Highway with plentiful options for accommodations, retail and services.

Relative to the creative economy, the St. John Valley lacks sufficient showcases for local artisans and crafters to display their products. The region has a tradition of showcasing its artisan work at craft fairs (ranging from handcrafts to food). But once the craft fair is over, it is nearly impossible to find handmade

goods available for direct sale in the Valley.²⁷ Moreover, major markets and concentrations of arts and cultural consumers are geographically far from the region. Access could be facilitated by high-speed Internet, which is currently available in major towns throughout Aroostook County, but not in smaller towns or on roads off main arteries.²⁸

Finally, many of the participants felt that at least some of the region's infrastructure issues could be improved if towns and chambers of commerce were willing to work in collaboration. Participants voiced the opinion that non-cooperation on a regional level hampers bringing many efforts to scale.

3.2 Regional Needs and Visions

To survive we need to think regionally.

– Ross Paradis, Frenchville

Through focus group sessions, interviews and general research, people shared their observations about how to make the St. John Valley a more prosperous place. They identified needs and opportunities, along with their hopes and visions for a stronger future.²⁹ We did not attempt to prioritize the findings, nor are our data complete, but the information we highlight below does serve as a starting point for action.

Clearly, there are dueling sentiments in the region: optimism and frustration. People generally have a positive and optimistic outlook for what the St. John Valley can become, how it can take advantage of its assets, and how it can transform its challenges into opportunities. At the same time, however, residents need to be able to see and feel the possibilities on the ground and understand how they can be realized. Many agree that there are innumerable opportunities based on the region's arts and cultural assets. Further, they are well aware that the region will become more prosperous if individuals and communities work together and think as being part of a region to encourage small business and more internal and external investment. Still, participants were frustrated and unsure about who needs to be doing this work – specifically, what entity (or entities) has the capacity to advance and sustain the development of a more prosperous region.

We have organized what we learned about regional needs and visions around two central concepts upon which moving forward must be based: regional planning and collaborative action; and stronger coordinated support for entrepreneurs and microenterprises.

a. Regional Planning and Collaborative Action

- *Identity*
- *Regional Leadership*
- *Product and Service Development*
- *Tourism*
- *Canada Connection*
- *Youth Retention*

²⁷ The Greater Madawaska Chamber of Commerce occasionally showcases art and craft and there are plans by individuals to showcase and sell regional art and craft in Madawaska and Lille.

²⁸ Just the same, investment is occurring in the information technology industry to provide greater broadband access to all areas of Aroostook County.

²⁹ A member of the regional advisory group who lives in Madawaska explains: "Cultural strengths need to be tapped into and marketed, local attitudes toward residents and outsiders need to be reconditioned, re-education needs to occur, and a constant practice of the 'right' and positive actions for economic development particularly tailored to this culture and region."

- b. Entrepreneurial Support
 - *Sector Cohesion*
 - *Regional Website and Marketing*
 - *Workshops and Training*
 - *Public and Private Investment*

3.2.a Regional Planning and Collaborative Action

Identity

The general consensus is that the St. John Valley needs to think of itself as a region. Whether it does currently is debatable. From time to time, depending on the situation, municipalities or nonprofit groups initiate activities that are regional in scope (e.g., boat landing access to the St. John River, World Acadian Congress). But, generally, each community tends to focus on its own needs and survival, which has an enduring negative impact on the cooperative spirit of communities. Participants felt strongly that regional strategy development would encourage internal and external investment, and that regional identity could be leveraged to promote new opportunities – particularly in the creative economy.³⁰

A specific aspiration voiced by participants related to how products and services from the region could be identified and marketed. The success of the “Made-in-Maine” label has prompted other regions to similarly brand their products. Participants indicated that the “St. John Valley” name is often used among community members to express a shared identity that is centered on culture and language.

Moreover, the term “St. John Valley” is gaining recognition within Aroostook County and the state. However, when talking about their products, only a few focus group participants had heard local entrepreneurs use “St. John Valley” to help promote their products. Rather, “Acadian” is the more frequently used identifier, and perhaps, participants suggested, a more viable and cultural distinctive branding opportunity.

Finally, participants considered that consumer inability to differentiate product quality might be partially mitigated by targeted marketing, education and the continued collaborative use of a strong, regional brand. They are confident that the region needs to market its distinctiveness and that this will be of benefit to small businesses in their own marketing efforts.

Regional Leadership

Research participants desire stronger leadership that is focused on building networks and expertise to carry out development efforts. They concur that leadership exists in the St. John Valley, but *regional* leadership must be supported and nurtured. Further, the kind of leadership needed is one that points toward a new future and is powerful and encompassing enough to retain and attract youth and skilled individuals, but respectful and preserving of the region’s heritage and cherished values. Participants believe that this leadership needs to come from the private sector, but also pointed to the vital role of public institutions such as the University of Maine at Fort Kent and local schools.

One area where regional leadership could have great impact is in regional planning. Participants indicated that on the whole there is a lack of regional planning in the area. And while planning organizations such as the Northern Maine Development Commission are engaged in regional strategy development, participants felt that these entities were typically focused on large business development and were ineffective in assisting small businesses and individual entrepreneurs. For example, participants

³⁰ The Valley could take advantage of state and national programs (such as National Heritage Areas, American Heritage River, etc.). However, to receive designation for some of these programs, high levels of regional infrastructure are required. The region has already received State Scenic Byway designation.

suggested that one great need is assistance with grant writing and resource development. Yet, only at a regional scale, could assistance of this type be feasible to provide. Microbusiness assistance strategies are simply not sustainable if attempted on a town-by-town basis.

Additionally, participants called for the creation of a regional entity to provide collaborative leadership. For example, there is no “St. John Valley Chamber of Commerce” – instead, each of the larger towns has its own chamber (i.e., Greater Fort Kent, Greater Van Buren, etc.), and serves only the immediately surrounding communities. Something new is needed. As one participant voiced, “Arts, culture, design, and creating – they all come from a sense of passion. The creative thinker seems to be the unifier. Maybe we need a ‘Regional Creative Experience Center’ to provide support and networking opportunities for cultural entrepreneurs, eco-tourism providers, artisans, and creative thinkers. The offer is a combination of experiences, creativity and passion, and entrepreneurialism.” Regardless of how it happens, the participants were unified in their opinion that tremendous opportunity can come from visionary regional leadership and collaboration.³¹

Product and Service Development

Participants saw the potential to develop products, services and activities focused on the culture and traditions as well as nature-based assets of the region. They also believe that stronger regional cultural development initiatives, coupled with economic opportunities were required to transmit the cultural heritage to younger generations and encourage them to stay. Some examples that participants identified include:

- French immersion programs
- French translation services for state government and business
- Museums linked with bike and nature trails
- Shared marketing of specialized products, organic food, handmade items
- Venues that showcase and sell locally handmade products
- International experiences
- Self-sustaining museums with better visitor experiences (e.g., able to accommodate bus tours)
- Kiosks about the history and heritage of the region at various locations
- Packaged itineraries and services that link cultural sites/activities with nature-based activities
- Green energy
- Potato vodka, linen or fine art paper from flax
- Community forest planning
- Trail systems for cycling and Nordic skiing
- Strategies to take better advantage of North Maine Woods and Allagash Wilderness Waterway
- Increase organic farming and crop diversification
- Retail businesses offering products for eco-recreation activities
- Accommodations investing in services for eco-recreationists
- Four season tourist destination development
- Nature trails along the St. John River and elsewhere

³¹ In the early 1990s, many towns were members of the St. John Valley Business Attraction Group, which promoted the region as a place to do business at trade shows in the U.S. and Canada. This group was created as part of a state program supported by the State through Governor Angus King. Once funding stopped the group could not secure funds to exist, and dissolved.

Tourism

There was recognition amongst participants that many of the products produced in the St. John Valley may not be desired by, or affordable to, local citizens but may sell well in premium markets that could be supported by increased tourism. Participants were interested in expanding tourism (primarily cultural and nature-based) in the Valley not only as an economic driver, but also as an opportunity to educate residents and visitors alike about the region's cultural heritage.

Many of the participants would like to capitalize on the St. John Valley's shared Acadian culture, much like portions of Louisiana have done with their shared Cajun ancestry (many feel this idea is completely untapped as well as the region's connection to Québec). There is currently no broad name recognition associated with "Acadian" and participants expressed interest in changing that. Overall, participants were of two minds when it came to tourism. They recognized that residents who would benefit directly from increased tourism would be supportive of efforts to bring more tourists to the region. But, other residents would not welcome byproducts of increased tourism – more traffic, noise, and usage of their favorite trails, boat launches, and so on.

On balance, however, the participants felt that not enough is done to promote tourism. They expressed their frustration that inadequate attention is given to visitors who travel (usually long distances) to the region. For example, accommodations and hospitality are generally below par in the region. Visitor intercept surveys also showed that dining experiences in the region were well below satisfactory levels and there are few packaged incentives to offer visitors a range of experiences in the region.

Canada Connection

Customs regulations have made selling products across the Canadian border a significant challenge. Participants indicated that assistance for small business entrepreneurs from a nonprofit, or quasi-governmental agency would help remedy this situation. Something as simple as a brochure with contact information for customs officials on the Canadian and U.S. sides with steps to working through customs could assist businesses. On a larger scale, some participants envisioned a regional agency able to develop a contract for the collaborative sale of St. John Valley produced products into the neighboring Canadian market.

Participants were interested in tourism cross-advertising with their Canadian neighbors, utilizing the St. John River as a connection (e.g., the Cities of the Androscoggin [River] link the towns of Lewiston and Auburn). Already, initiatives such as *Voici the Valley Cultureway* utilize the shared Acadian and Québécois heritage from both sides of the river. Although innumerable factors have affected the dismissal of, or disinterest in communities a stone's throw away from one another, participants are aware that undoubtedly, political structures determine much of this alienation. Regardless of these challenges, participants know there is great potential for development by virtue of the border.³²

Youth Retention

Diversity and entrepreneurialism are used here in the broadest sense of both words. Diversity, for instance, refers to the population as well as the kind of activities and businesses in the region. Entrepreneurialism refers to business as well as all community and not-for-profit activities, which require entrepreneurial thought and action. Simply put, in the words of a high school student, "We need more people doing different things."

³² The border crossing between Edmundston, NB and Madawaska, ME, is one of the busiest entries along the Canada/United States border. In 2008, close to 1.5 million vehicles crossed into Madawaska. This movement of people, whether constituting a high percentage of local residents or not, is an indicator for development.

In fact, young people are abundantly clear about their vision for a better region. They want vibrant streets. They desire more places to convene and more things to do. Attracting people to stay and move to the region comes down to a simple truth, “No one wants to come to a town with only a few places to go to.” They desire flexibility and options – essentially jobs that can be done anywhere.

One person said that she would prefer to live in the St. John Valley and do the job she has in southern Maine, but access to diverse services and activities are lacking in the region. Simply put, young people want more diverse and abundant choices for employment, recreation and social interactions. At the same time, participants agreed that what has lasting value is what comes naturally, is authentic, and comes directly from the region. This can translate into consumable activities, services, and products that reinforce self-esteem, especially for young people.

3.2.b Entrepreneurial Support

Sector Cohesion

Entrepreneurs and small business owners in the region feel they are on their own when it comes to accessing larger markets and utilizing tools to expand their product or service reach. They are well aware that their market must go beyond the region to be a success. Similarly, they know that value added is important to their business – that having a more direct connection with the consumer and bringing them closer to the product or service is essential. Creative entrepreneurs are aware that it would be beneficial to collaborate together and grow as a sector to market their products and gain access to larger markets.

Regional Website and Marketing

The financial and human resource costs of creating and maintaining a website were too daunting for many entrepreneurs, and yet the Internet was identified as a key means to accessing larger markets. Many expressed the need for expertise in marketing, promotions, design, and distribution. They identified the need for a “one-stop shopping” Internet site for St. John Valley products and services. They desire a better balance between self-reliance among individuals and towns and collaborative tools to promote business development across the region (e.g., financing, promotion and sales, cross-border, incubation). Further, participants considered that a regional entity dedicated to small business growth could create, host and maintain the website and use it as a means to market their services and products and where appropriate, market a regional brand name.

Workshops and Training

Workshops and training were identified as a means for small business and entrepreneurs to learn how to create business plans specifically geared for culturally based products and market their product or service effectively. Many noted their frustration about the local market’s lack of knowledge about what constitutes something of quality (for example, understanding the difference between a hand-crafted woven scarf made by a weaver versus a mass-produced scarf sold at Kmart).

From a needs analysis survey of the creative sector, slightly over one half of respondents indicated that their creative activity is their primary occupation, though almost 70% earn less than \$10,000 per year from their activity. Participants in the focus group sessions as well as the survey results indicate that to grow their business or service they need technical assistance and e-commerce training, public relations and communications, marketing and design, distribution, business and computer skills, organizational and business planning/management, and financial and strategic planning.

To strengthen their businesses, survey participants also indicated the need for a positive and supportive attitude, followed by market and consumer information, networking, financing and capital, marketing/distribution, product/service development, and partnering. Sixty-seven percent of survey participants said they would be interested in participating in a business incubation program.

Public and Private Investment

For small businesses and individuals it is difficult to secure financing to grow their enterprise, and collateral is especially a challenge to attain for entrepreneurs with primarily creative and intellectual assets. Participants indicated that a private/public sector collaboration to create a community loan fund or a microloan and grant program would be beneficial in assisting entrepreneurs and existing small businesses looking to expand. For example, the Grameen Bank, founded by Nobel Prize winning economist Muhammad Yunus, was built on the concept of community loans for small entrepreneurs.³³

In a larger sense, the participants want to see greater collaboration between private and public entities within the region for the purpose of leveraging outside investment. In turn, outside investment could be used to fund many of the ideas contained within this report for strengthening the creative economy. Finally, one town manager asserted that building upon what currently exists is a smart strategy, “We’re definitely competitive here. We just need to pay closer attention to what we’re doing well. Good stuff feeds off of each other – it attracts investment and other activities to grow.”

³³ Additional information on the Grameen Bank can be found at www.grameen-info.org.

4. MOVING FORWARD

Creativity and human talent, more so than traditional production factors such as labour and capital, are fast becoming powerful engines of sustainable development.

– United Nations Conference on Trade and Development

The indigenous assets of culture and place are plentiful in the St. John Valley. And, while the challenges facing the region may appear numerous and daunting, they should not overshadow the potential opportunities. After more than two years of research, we believe that leveraging the Valley's creative economy assets to increase prosperity is not only possible, but well within reach – as long as such efforts are driven by regional vision and collaboration between the private and public sectors.

Based on what we learned, we recommend the pursuit of four coordinated strategies:

1. Build regional leadership, identity and collaborative capacity.
2. Strengthen programs and assistance to entrepreneurs and nonprofits.
3. Invest in the region's creative assets.
4. Cultivate pride in culture and place.

Recommendation

4.1 Build Regional Leadership, Identity and Collaborative Capacity

The participants we engaged in this project were clear in their assessment that territorialism among towns and the lack of regional vision, planning and collaboration hamper development of a prosperous economy for the Valley. Our review of best practices supports this conclusion. None of the successful models of development we identified were defined by political boundaries; rather they encompassed the natural boundaries of cultural and economic activity.

Achieving meaningful destination tourism around the concept of Acadian culture, for example, may well require leadership that encompasses both sides of the international border. Moreover, in many respects, New Brunswick and Québec are highly advanced in their tourism development and the St. John Valley has much to learn from its heritage neighbors.³⁴

Sustained and constructive interface with New Brunswick and Québec is also essential to strengthening the region's French heritage identity. In fact, Maine, New Brunswick and Québec, will be hosting the World Acadian Congress in 2014, which will take place directly in the St. John Valley. Spearheaded by Canada, this will be a major two-week event attracting tens of thousands of people of Acadian heritage from all parts of the world. Though a one-time event, it will focus attention on the region's culture, traditions, and place, and provides an enormous opportunity to build much-needed infrastructure. Planning for the Congress may serve as a good background for discussions on cross-border cooperation. Certainly, the region can take advantage of the high visibility that such an event will create to begin sensitive and careful tourism planning that respects the conflicting desires among Valley residents for tourism while preserving the quiet calm of rural life.

³⁴ Maine and New Brunswick collaborated on a Two-Nation Vacation promotional campaign, but did not include the St. John Valley's international region as part of the package.

Leadership is not the only important factor, for when it comes to implementation, scale matters enormously. Achieving impact and sustainability requires operating at a sufficient scale where efficiencies can be realized, costs can be distributed over a broad base, and desired markets can be entered. For some of the ideas contained within this report to come fully to fruition, the St. John Valley will need to reach to the south and north to achieve the desired levels of impact and sustainability.

Overcoming political boundaries to plan and implement at a scale that matters does not happen overnight. To begin, participants suggested that leaders at many levels be brought together to establish a vision for the Valley. This is a vital step. But long-term implementation of such a vision also may require the creation of some new form of regional entity as well as sustained investment in building regional leadership capacity.

The seeds for a regional alliance in the Valley were sown through the regional advisory committee for this project. Many of its members have been working together for over a decade on numerous cultural development efforts, and it may be that an informal alliance of this type could act as a catalyst for strengthening and leveraging culture and place for economic prosperity. Regardless of how formalized the entity or from where such leadership emanates, the goal is to bridge informal creative economy leadership to formal leadership structures throughout the Valley (and County) for the purposes of harnessing the creative talents of people, building networks, inspiring policy, securing funding, and developing and implementing programs that leverage assets for greater prosperity.

Examples and Considerations for Development

- The Champlain Valley Heritage Network in New York is a community action coalition working for the region's revitalization by linking economic, human, natural, and cultural resources. This unincorporated "organization of organizations" represents most of the groups in a nine-town region. They work as an informal partnership on behalf of more than two-dozen organizations, all which contribute their time and expertise to building networks for change, sharing operating costs and provide cooperative services as they can. The network operates with one part-time staff person who coordinates monthly meetings, yearly work plans, and monthly reports.
- Western Mountains Alliance (WMA) is a nonprofit organization that champions the formation of sustainable development strategies for Western Maine. Key focuses include developing leadership capacity, coordinating resource conservation and planning, and revitalizing local downtowns. WMA was organized by the late philanthropist and industrialist H. King Cummings and attracted civic-minded people with diverse philosophies, interests, and locations. Today, the organization functions as a leading advocate for change by promoting innovative and cooperative ways of solving problems and partnering with dozens of other organizations to implement vital education, business, finance, environment, community development, public policy and health-related projects spanning the region.
- The Bangor Region Leadership Institute – one of approximately seven regional leadership development programs in Maine – serves 22 cities and towns in the region and has been operating for almost 14 years. In that time span, the program has graduated hundreds of local civic leaders who comprise a rich and ever-expanding professional network in the Bangor region. Alumni regularly cite this network as a source of new career opportunities, professional support, friendship, board membership recruitment, community volunteerism, and more. Importantly, many also say that their participation in the institute provided them with a regional and cross-sectoral perspective that they had not acquired through any other means.

- **Your Town:** Citizens’ Institute on Rural Design and Community Development is a workshop sponsored by the National Endowment for the Arts and the National Trust for Historic Preservation, which promotes better design and planning as a means to small-town economic development and viability. Workshops teach rural community leaders how to assess their town’s physical assets – its architectural, environmental and historical features – and make the best of them. Regional leaders brainstorm about problems faced by the towns in their region, frequently alongside local and national experts. Participants are shown how to evaluate developers’ plans and funding programs, and how to build their workforce capacity by fostering networks of volunteers.
- The City of Littleton, Colorado pioneered “economic gardening” in 1987 as an alternative to traditional economic development. Their position was (and is) that economies could be grown from the inside through well-cultivated entrepreneurial activity. The city focuses on establishing a nurturing environment for local companies, rather than business recruitment or providing incentives. They believe that by building community assets and infrastructure, wealth is created from the inside. The core elements of economic gardening include providing accurate and timely information, infrastructure (e.g., interchanges and light rail, cultural and recreation amenities, and intellectual infrastructure) and connections for local growth companies (e.g., connections between industry and academia).
- Several regions in North Carolina forged partnerships with various entities to develop strategic plans for economic development. For instance, a comprehensive strategic plan for advancing the creative arts in a three-city region was created; a county Chamber of Commerce and the University of North Carolina System worked together to produce a comprehensive action plan for economic development; and a town carried out an economic development plan that focused on ways to expand its creative economy and have a more vibrant downtown core.

Recommendation

4.2 Strengthen Programs and Assistance to Entrepreneurs and Nonprofits

Many of the artisans and small entrepreneurs we engaged expressed frustration at the lack of accessible and creative economy related business information, assistance and funding programs. Moreover, they desire better connections within their respective communities for peer networking, and marketing and distributing their products and services.

Important topics identified repeatedly by artisans we interviewed and surveyed include: e-commerce; public relations and communications; marketing and design; distribution methods; business computer skills; business plan development; and financial and organizational management. Their counterparts involved in nonprofit cultural organizations added topics, such as: strategic planning; visitor experience and hospitality techniques; interpretation methods, and grant writing. Clearly, there is an opportunity for targeted education in the form of training workshops and business incubation for creative entrepreneurs.

Additionally, a network of individuals and businesses that work in art production, traditional arts and trades, agri-food, and specialized products could be showcased, marketed and promoted regionally. This could take the form of showcase venues as an interactive way to combine cultural and experiential tourism, direct retail sales, and education about traditions. A pay-for-hire distribution service could promote and sell the goods and services of artisans and creative entrepreneurs within the region.³⁵

³⁵ Artisans can become members of the Maine Craft Association, which offers a state venue in Gardiner to showcase and promote Maine craft.

This network could also include a regional website for online networking, promotion, mentoring, and marketing of authentic Valley-made goods and services.

At the same time, many artists and creative entrepreneurs focus first and foremost on their creative work – business development considerations come second and, in many instances, are not as highly valued as artistic integrity. For example, shifting artistic processes from every piece being handmade to some produced in quantity, is often considered to be a denigration of the artistic process – a sacrifice many artists are unwilling to make even when it might result in earning a livable wage from their work.

Assistance strategies, therefore, need to be sensitive to the particular dynamics of artists and the creative process. Added to this challenge, traditional business assistance organizations (including commercial funders) often lack experience in valuing the creative/intellectual collateral artists bring to the table when seeking funds to advance their work. Thus, microlending programs often need to reconsider their risk valuations and complement such programs with wrap-around business development support systems in order to best leverage their investments in the creative economy.

The models of assistance found in other regions suggest that services to assist artisans are best delivered locally – sometimes via highly individualized consultations. However, to be viable and sustainable, they also need to be coordinated at a scale where demonstrable impact is achieved. Fortunately, many other regions around the United States and world have pioneered programs to accomplish the dual aims of local service delivery and regional coordination to achieve scale and impact. Moreover, regional and statewide partners such as Women, Work and Community, Northern Maine Development Commission, and the Northern Maine Community College can readily fulfill some of the programmatic needs identified above.

Examples and Considerations for Development

- Business incubation is typically an intensive program that engages a participant in relevant training ranging from three months to one year. For example, the Arts Council of New Orleans created an Arts Incubator in a renovation warehouse. The Incubator has two components: (a) artists guild center that provides artists with a place to work exhibit and sell their art, and (b) arts business center that provides services, technical assistance, and office space. Closer to home, the Down East Business Alliance developed an Incubator Without Walls training program that helps businesses take advantage of the number of tourists who want to experience nature-based opportunities, spend more on green tourism activities, and experience local culture. This one-year, free program is aimed to help businesses increased their bottom line, position their offer, develop a strategy, craft a plan, build networks, and expand and grow their business.
- The *Réseau Economusée* (Economuseum Network) was established in Canada to showcase traditional trades and knowledge. Craft or agri-food businesses open their doors to the public, showing how they create their handmade product. Founded in Québec by the Economuseum Corporation, the network has spread to Ontario and Atlantic Canada. These businesses, called Economuseums, are self-financed through the sale of their products. There is a wide range of trades, such as soap making, brewing and wine making, maple syrup making, cabinetmaking, stoneware production, jewelry, glass making.
- Handmade in America is a nonprofit organization supporting craft-related businesses and activities in Western North Carolina. Their strategies focus on creating sustainable economic development opportunities that maintain their rural quality of life, providing business and financial support for craftspeople, and raising awareness of the value of craft. Their initiatives

include an extensive guidebook of a craft heritage trail (which highlights the artisans' studios), garden and countryside trails, and a program to provide financial assistance to craftspeople and craft businesses.

- The Grameen Bank, founded by Nobel Prize winning economists Muhammad Yunus, was built on the concept of community loans for small entrepreneurs. Situated in Bangladesh, the Grameen Bank changed the conventional banking practice by removing the need for collateral and created a banking system based on mutual trust, accountability, participation and creativity. Their approach to providing financial support is based on guiding principles, which include ensuring a credit system that serves the targeted population (i.e., those in need), adopting a progressive attitude that development is a long-term process, providing understandable procedures for borrowers, and training leaders to gain “development ethics based on rigour, creativity, understanding and respect for the rural environment.”
- In the early to mid 1990s municipalities of the St. John Valley came together to create the St. John Valley Business Attraction Program. Supported by state government, it was a multi-community partnership working together to enhance the business and economic vitality of the region. Technical assistance and loan funds to businesses were offered; however, due to a lack of state funding, the program was dissolved a couple years after it began.
- The Western Maine Market, a project of the Western Mountains Alliance, is a virtual and real market where locally grown food can be purchased. It receives seed funds from various agencies (i.e., Northeast SARE and the Harvest Fund) and is operated by a volunteer advisory board, farmers, producers and community volunteers. During the growing season on certain days, the market goes “live” for buying product directly, on other days produce can be purchased through the website and delivered at various locations at another time.
- The Kennebec-Chaudière Community Outreach Grants is a collaborative grant program of the Maine Humanities Council and the Kennebec-Chaudière Heritage Corridor. The program assists Maine organizations along the Corridor develop projects in community history, heritage tourism and cultural preservation that will enrich the Corridor, and help local residents and visitors gain a better understanding of the stories and culture. The program is on-going, but grants are offered only as funds become available.
- The Upper St. John River Organization promotes sustainable forest management and natural science education in the watershed of the Upper St. John River. The organization also plans to promote sustainable regional businesses and activities and pursue development of a cooperative to provide such activities as forest cruising, GIS-based forest planning, wood harvesting, and wood delivery services for local land and a regional market. There are plans to develop an e-marketing portal for handmade products and services in the region.
- In April 2010, under the auspices of this project, the Foster Student Innovation Center offered a two-hour workshop on innovation at the University of Maine at Fort Kent. Participants included university students, creative economy regional committee members, and small entrepreneurs. The Foster Student Innovation Center holds workshops frequently in Orono, which Valley entrepreneurs could access by satellite. This is a step that can be taken immediately and at very little cost.

Recommendation

4.3 Invest in the Region's Creative Assets

Without doubt, the St. John Valley has rich creative assets upon which to build. Many of the region's fine crafts and heritage traditions should be invested in simply for their aesthetic value and for the sense of pride and awe that they inspire. Indeed, when visitors crest the rise in the agrarian village of Lille and catch their first glimpse of the cultural landmark, the Musée culturel du Mont-Carmel, there is an immediate appreciation of beauty, heritage, and place – and this is arguably, enough.

Investing in the region's creative assets, therefore, needs to occur with respect for the myriad values inherent in such assets. Creative assets are renewable only when they are stewarded with care for the authenticity and quality with which they were originally created. For example, one cannot grow the world's highest quality flax in soils that have not been well managed. The traditional snowshoes made in the Valley differ from those purchased at commodity outing goods stores – and shifting from handmade to commodity is not a pathway toward increased prosperity in the St. John Valley. Instead, supporting high levels of talent and maintaining authenticity for the purpose of entering premium markets should guide investing in the region's creative assets.

There is ample opportunity for the creation of premium products and services that are linked directly to the Valley's cultural and place-based assets. The region is already home to many successful enterprises that have grown as a direct result of indigenous assets. Visibility of the art, craft, and agri-food production within the region for local residents and visitors is essential, not only to provide the opportunity to purchase these goods, but to promote and support their production.

Consider the following opportunities for further investment, all of which share a common denominator – they emerge *from the source*:

- Agri-tourism development – tours of farms, farm-stays, produce sold directly
- Traditional crops such as flax can be grown, harvested and made into linen or other products
- Vodka from potatoes, Styrofoam biodegradable packaging from potato starch
- Buckwheat, another traditional crop, can be marketed as Kasha for the health food industry
- Diversify products (e.g., pulp used in traditional products to make high quality art paper)
- Apprenticeships of traditional trades (become a destination for top apprenticeship training)
- Position traditional music as a viable industry (e.g., Cajun and Gaelic music)
- Businesses that can establish a sister business across the border to serve the Canadian market
- Acadian culture – distinct tourism region, exchanges other French-speaking regions
- Story-telling festival in the Allagash
- Traditional cuisine more fully developed in restaurants (Acadian, Scots-Irish, Native)
- Packaged itineraries and experiences for visitors linking cultural and nature-based assets
- Bus tours (that can link to train tours) of regional museums, churches and cemeteries
- Link cross-country ski trails throughout the region with cycling trails
- Heritage tours given to canoe enthusiasts of the Allagash Wilderness Waterway
- Architecture and furniture based on regional designs and materials
- Renewable green energy approaches based on abundance of land, forest, water, and wind
- French translation services and immersion program
- Train and airplane scenic tours
- Specialized sporting and recreational products available to eco-recreational enthusiasts

The export of high quality products and services through regional programs that support such efforts at scale is one part of the equation. The other half of the equation involves bringing new spending to the Valley in the form of tourists. Becoming a premium tourism destination requires not only investment in

singular assets, but, even more importantly, creating experiences and “packages” that link assets – thus giving tourists reasons to stay longer and spend more money. Unfortunately, our visitor intercept surveys revealed this to be a weakness in the Valley. Time and again, they told us that it was hard to spend their money in the Valley – leading some visitors to cross over into Canada where they could more easily purchase fine food, better lodging, fine arts and cultural goods, and others to return home with too much change in their pockets.

Perhaps, one of the greatest under-tapped opportunities in the St. John Valley is to link eco-recreational and cultural experiences. This idea has been explored, but never brought fully to fruition. For example, consider linking cultural activities with the Can-Am Crown sled dog races. This could take place within the same town or in other locations to maximize visitor experience and visitation of the area (a visitor could enjoy local foods, artisans producing their craft, traditions of the communities, and so on). Likewise, the history and tradition of logging in the region could be shared by creating packaged incentives for visitors to canoe along parts of the Allagash and St. John rivers with a local historian or storyteller, and stopping at the museums along the way to see exhibitions on the tradition. Such “linking” efforts will only be achieved through private/public collaborative efforts that bring together artists, chambers of commerce and town offices, museums, place-based and cultural groups, community centers, and retail businesses.

In assessing the opportunities for tourism destination investment, regional leaders would do well to start with the events and initiatives that have a strong foundation and have built equity over the years. Consider, for example, events such as the Acadian Festival and the Ploye Festival, or initiatives like the Four Seasons Trail or the *Voici the Valley Cultureway*. Moreover, look to the province of Québec, which has perfected a system of networks for showcasing and celebrating culture and place. Take their lead and expand upon the *Cultureway*, for example, by creating a series of specialized experiences, such as a Religious Heritage Trail of historic churches and cemeteries, a Food Heritage Trail of traditional cuisine, an Arts and Crafts Trail with museums, galleries, and boutiques, and a Nature Vista Trail of outstanding natural sites. Additionally, since the region’s Tour de la Vallée and other mountain biking events attracts hundreds of cyclists and cycling enthusiasts, it follows that cycling initiatives are an attractive opportunity for the region to further develop.

Making the French language more visible is another key component to promoting the region as a distinct and special place. In 1998 the conference *Connexions Affaires* (Business Connections) brought people from Maine, New Brunswick and Québec to discuss how to increase trade and economic development by leveraging the French language in the region. While some good developments emerged from this conference, much more can and should be done. For example, the French language could be made more visible through an increase of bilingual signage (for streets, business, etc.) and integrating the French language more consistently in websites, print material and events.

Examples and Considerations for Development

- The Lower St. Lawrence region of Québec offers the *Terroir, saveurs et gourmandises* (corridor of food and savory experiences) throughout the region managed by the region’s tourism department. They feature artisans (e.g., for cheese, bread, beers, chocolate), fishermen, farmers, florists, restaurant owners, etc. that offer food from the land and sea. A full color brochure featuring these businesses along with a regional map is produced.
- The Lake Champlain Bikeways Network is along the Adirondack coast in New York State. There are fourteen bike loops and over 350 miles of principal route around Lake Champlain with 26 interpretative bike loops. These theme loops are 750 miles in all, linking to the lake region’s natural, cultural, agricultural, recreational, and historic resources. This bike network is a result of the Lake Champlain Basin Program, which was established in 1997 with communities in

New York and Vermont. It began as a grass roots effort to develop a plan for the Lake Champlain Byways, to promote economic development while stewarding the region's resources.³⁶

- A farmer in Fort Kent Mills shifted from potato farming, which he considered on the wane, to growing another traditional crop called buckwheat. From the buckwheat they produce a *ploye* mix – a buckwheat pancake mix that reflects the culture of the region. It is sold locally and in retail venues throughout the state.
- Sherbrooke, Québec is home to numerous murals painted on existing buildings by local art students. The murals realistically document and celebrate aspects of the city's heritage and attract thousands of people (many in tour buses) to see the outstanding art. The murals are done by advanced art students and executed with expert skill.

Recommendation

4.4 Cultivate Pride in Culture and Place

Throughout this report we have been illustrating how indigenous creative assets can be leveraged for increased prosperity. Yet there are examples throughout the world of regions where indigenous assets such as language, heritage, and even place itself have been lost or permanently scarred. At the risk of stating the obvious: culture and place are highly renewable, but not without active cultivation. Cultivation happens in many ways and includes land use planning, downtown revitalization, education for all ages, and the passing down of heritage traditions from one generation to the next. At its core, cultivating pride in culture and place requires vital private/public partnerships to craft sound policies and programs and to create incentives for retaining what is central to quality of place. Though the St. John Valley is a region whose culture is characterized as living – one that is not facing renewal or struggling to regain itself and whose land is relatively intact – vigilance in safeguarding them is essential.

Safeguarding culture and place requires not only many players, but also the commitment of leadership at many levels. Successful communities are strong on respect for diversity, openness and pride of place. For example, making the region's culture and sense of place more visible can be achieved through a concerted and strategic effort on the part of municipalities in partnership with business and community groups, to adopt cultural plans, champion downtown revitalization and other development programs, encourage signage and store fronts that are appealing, protect indigenous architecture, support public art and events, offer tax incentives, and encourage the growth and support creative business. Cultural organizations and artists can engage in strategic planning that is focused on leveraging their assets for greater prosperity. Even more importantly, community leaders can embrace rather than resist collaborative efforts across towns and with other regions – including in Canada.

The concept of stewardship is important to embrace. “Stewardship taps our basic human impulse to care for our home and its surroundings – be it a parcel of land, a community garden, a neighborhood, or an historic monument, or the larger area of a watershed, mountain range or stretch of coastline. It builds on our sense of obligation to other people: our family, our community, and future generations. Stewardship puts conservation in the hands of the people most affected by it.”³⁷

³⁶ Freshtrack Adventures is a private enterprise with an office in Caribou, ME that offers cycling excursions that link communities throughout New England, Eastern Canada and Europe. The St. John Valley is on its itinerary.

³⁷ Brent Mitchell, Quebec-Labrador Foundation

The essential tenets of stewardship are to raise public awareness about the value of what is being protected and to engage people directly in taking care of what matters to them. Strategies include apprenticeship, mentoring in traditional trades and skills, internships and education for all ages. Because regional efforts to cultivate pride in culture and place are often overlooked, such as explicit stewardship strategies, we focus on them in some detail below.

The St. John Valley has a long tradition of handcrafting. An apprenticeship program could provide the means for master artisans in the region to teach their skills in cuisine, dance, music, woodcraft, textiles, and so on. The intent behind the program is to keep traditions relevant and alive, effectively setting the foundation for the creation and sustainability of a traditional skills network and market. This program provides an opportunity for youth to engage more directly and constructively with elders (and, ideally would be integrated into school curricula). Historical museums could offer their venue for teaching, showcasing items created, or organizing symposia about the craft. Further, an apprenticeship initiative can inspire tourism development by encouraging visitors to travel to the region for high quality apprenticeships in traditional trades. These programs can be developed in collaboration with museums, the university and community college, individual artisans, and nonprofit groups.

Similarly, cultural internships in various activities, such as ethnographic field research, museology, and conservation, would address the need for more scholarly research and practical attention to the role that culture and landscape play in our communities. Internships could include:

- Interpretation, management and promotion of historical collections
- Preservation and conservation of significant historic sites and places
- Creation of organizational action plans and visitor experience strategies
- Field research (e.g., to understand how cultural integrity, environmental protection or agricultural heritage impact economic development)
- Marketing surveys (e.g., to learn about the origin of visitors/users, levels of satisfaction, etc.)

Internships could be developed as a partnership between cultural and nature groups, and educational institutions (e.g., the humanities department or the Acadian Archives at the University of Maine at Fort Kent connected with regional nonprofit groups, such as the Maine Acadian Heritage Council and the Four Seasons Trail Association).

Finally, education for all ages, but particularly youth, is vital. Cultivating a creative mindset is essential. While the optimal situation would be full integration with K-12 education in the St. John Valley, a series of workshop or presentations designed for high school students (e.g., grades 10-12) could provide a strong foundation for them to think broadly about culture and place – and how through innovation, creativity and entrepreneurialism – they can be the creators of their own economic prosperity.

Examples and Considerations for Development

- The Maine Arts Commission's traditional arts apprenticeship offers master artisans a fee to provide one-on-one apprenticeship to people in their community. A local snowshoe maker from Eagle Lake and a rug braider from Fort Kent participated in the Commission's program and provided an apprenticeship to people in the region, many of whom have continued the craft.
- The Haystack Mountain School of Crafts in Deer Isle, Maine offers intensive training of craft and other artistic activities. The school's setting on an island and the caliber and diversity of its courses, have made Deer Isle a destination for people from throughout the state and nation.

- In 2003 the Quebec-Labrador Foundation through its internship program (which receives funds from a variety of sources) provided a graduate student intern from the University of Boulder in Colorado to the Musée culturel du Mont-Carmel in Lille to interpret its permanent collection and curate an exhibition. The student was completing graduate studies and required practical experience to receive her degree. The internship was four months long and included extensive research, design, and community involvement.
- The Traditional Skills Network is a program of the Quebec-Labrador Foundation to help preserve the craft traditions in the rural communities of the Belle Isle region of Newfoundland. Through craft demonstrations and workshops they highlight the region's diverse cultures and historic traditions. This program also provides a venue to sell the artisan's works.
- The Foster Student Innovation Center of the University of Maine provides intensive training institutes and workshops on aspects of innovation, entrepreneurial principles, and relevant topics on starting and maintaining a business. The Center currently offers this training to individuals and communities throughout Maine and has plans to develop a program for schools.

5. IN CONCLUSION

Over the past two years, a team of researchers went through a research process and connected with a wide range of people in the region, including artisans, entrepreneurs, farmers, designers, business and community leaders, and students. Our starting position was clear: culture and place not only improve our quality of life, but constitute a foundation for building prosperity. The research participants gave generously of their time and we are grateful for the perspectives and wisdom they shared with us.

Our aim was to identify opportunities, challenges and potential strategies for developing and better leveraging the St. John Valley's indigenous assets of culture and place for increased prosperity. Further, the project's intent was to begin a conversation on strengthening leadership capacity within the region and fostering a positive climate for youth retention and rural innovation. We have distilled what we learned into four strategic recommendations:

1. Build regional leadership, identity and collaborative capacity.
2. Strengthen programs and assistance to entrepreneurs and nonprofits.
3. Invest in the region's creative assets.
4. Cultivate pride in culture and place.

While simple to grasp, each will require concerted attention and collaborative effort to implement. Our hope is that this report will be a catalyst for the conversation and planning that is needed to move each of these recommendations to action. We have provided considerations for development both bold and incremental with as much attention given to the short-term process as the long-term goal.

It is worth repeating, however, that moving forward will require daring and capable leadership that has the capacity to build effective partnerships within and outside the region. And, while funds to advance creative economic development can be sought from innumerable sources, funding in the absence of such leadership will not result in the impacts we believe are possible. Increased prosperity will result only when many people – including unlikely partners – come together to create shared vision and a plan for moving forward together.

We believe the time to make this happen is now. The St. John Valley is poised for success. We are confident that the region's many challenges can be transcended and transformed into opportunities. Cultivating a creative mindset will be essential. Indeed, empowerment may be considered a buzzword, but Aurelle Collin, a farmer his whole life in the small community of Lille, knew about its relevance. His observation – *every village has all the talents of the world* – is testimony to the value and power of localized, inherent abilities. Essentially, everything we need, we have. Even so, along with a commitment to dialogue, creative planning, focused leadership, and an active pursuit of the recommendations, the St. John Valley is certain to realize its creative economic potential through culture and place.

6. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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7. APPENDICES

7.1 Regional, County, State Resources

The following are some regional, county and state entities that offer technical assistance or information on development related issues. This list is not comprehensive. (Area code 207)

Regional and County

Maine Centers for Women, Work and Community
Microenterprise Coordinator, Aroostook Region
33 Edgemont Drive, Presque Isle, ME 04769 764-0050 www.womenworkandcommunity.org

Northern Maine Community College
33 Edgemont Drive, Presque Isle, ME 04769 768-2808 www.nmcc.edu

Northern Maine Development Commission
11 W. Presque Isle Rd, P.O. Box 779, Caribou, ME 04736 498-8736/1-800-427-8736 www.nmdc.org
• Aroostook County Tourism: 1-888-321-2463 www.visitaroostook.com
• Aroostook Partnership for Progress: 498-8731 1-800-509-2146 www.appme.org
• Momentum Aroostook: www.momentumarostook.com
• Leaders Encouraging Aroostook Development: www.leadaroostook.com

St. John Valley Technology Center
431 U.S. Route 1, Frenchville, ME 04745 543-6606 www.sjvtc.mainecte.org

University of Maine at Fort Kent
23 University Drive, Fort Kent, ME 04743-1292
1-888-879-8635 www.umfk.maine.edu
• Center for Rural Sustainable Development: 834-8606

State

State of Maine: www.maine.gov/portal/index.php

Cultural Resources Information Center
84 State House Station, Augusta, ME 04333-0084
287-7591 www.maine.gov/sos/arc/cric

Maine Arts Commission
193 State Street, 25 SHS, Augusta, ME 04333-0025
287-2724 1-877-887-3878 www.mainearts.com

Maine Association of Nonprofits
565 Congress Street, Suite 301, Portland, ME 04101
871-1885 www.nonprofitmaine.org

Maine Center for Creativity
7 Custom House Street, Portland, ME 04101
775-4100 ext 240 www.mainecenterforcreativity.org

Maine Crafts Association
27 Service Plaza Drive, West Gardiner, ME 04345 588-0021 www.mainearts.org

Maine Department of Conservation, Bureau of Parks and Lands
22 State House Station, 18 Elkins Lane (AMHI Campus), Augusta, ME 04333-0022
287-3821 www.maine.gov/doc/parks/

Maine Department of Economic and Community Development
59 State House Station, Augusta, ME 04333-0059 624-9800 www.businessinmaine.gov
• Maine Office of Tourism 624-9810 www.visitmaine.com

Maine Department of Transportation
16 State House Station, Augusta, ME 04333-0016 624-3104 www.maine.gov/mdot

Maine Historic Preservation Commission
65 State House Station, Augusta, ME 04333-0065 287-2132 www.maine.gov/mhpc

Maine Historical Society
489 Congress Street, Portland, ME 04101 774-1822 www.mainehistory.org

Maine Humanities Council
674 Brighton Avenue, Portland, ME 04102 773-5051 www.mainehumanities.org

Maine State Planning
184 State Street, 38 State House Station, Augusta, ME 04333-0038
287-6077 1-800-662-4545 www.maine.gov/spo

National Park Service, Rivers and Trails Program
Northeast Region, 14 Maine Street, Suite 302, Brunswick, ME 04011 725-4934
www.nps.gov/ncrc/programs/rtca/contactus/regions/northeast.html

University of Maine
• Center for Tourism, Research and Outreach (CenTRO)
The Maine Business School, 5723 Corbett Business Building, University of Maine,
Orono, ME 04469-5723 581-1933 www.umaine.edu/centro
• Office of Research and Economic Development
5717 Corbett Hall, Room 430, University of Maine, Orono, ME 04469 581-1401 www.umaine.edu/dic
• Foster Center for Student Innovation
5798 Student Innovation Center, UM, Orono, ME 04469 581-1454 www.umaine.edu/innovation
• Margaret Chase Smith Policy Center
5784 York Complex, Bldg. #4, University of Maine, Orono, ME 04469-5784 581-1648
<http://mcspolicycenter.umaine.edu>

United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), Rural Development
• State Office: Rural Development, 967 Illinois Avenue, Suite 4,
PO Box 405, Bangor, ME 04402-0405 990-9168 www.rurdev.usda.gov/me/index.htm
• Presque Isle Area Office: 735 Main Street, Suite 1, Presque Isle, ME 04769-2285 764-4157
www.rurdev.usda.gov/me/Offices/PresqueArea.htm

7.2 Definitions

The following definitions are composites from a variety of sources and are included as a general reference for some of the terms used in this report.

Creative Economy – an evolving concept based on creative assets potentially generating economic growth and development. It can foster income generation, job creation, and export earnings while promoting social inclusion, cultural diversity and human development; it embraces economic, cultural and social aspects interacting with technology, intellectual property, and tourism objectives; it is a set of knowledge-based economic activities with a development dimension and cross-cutting linkages at macro and micro levels to the overall economy, and it is a feasible development option calling for innovative multidisciplinary policy responses and intergovernmental action. *(United Nations Commission on Trade and Development (Unctad) Creative Economy Report, 2008)*

Creative Industries – are activities that have their origin in individual creativity, skill and talent and that have the potential for wealth and job creation through the generation and exploitation of intellectual property. It encompasses sectors across the traditional arts, electronic and print media, new media such as games and other software, as well as design, architecture and fashion. *(United Kingdom Department of Culture, Media and Sport)*

Culture – is the whole complex of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features that characterize a society or social group. It includes not only the arts and letters, but also modes of life, fundamental human rights, value systems, traditions and beliefs. *(UNESCO, 1982)* It is a dynamic and organic whole or total way of life concerned with the way people visualize and interpret the world, organize themselves, conduct their affairs, elevate and embellish life, and position themselves in the world. *(D. Paul Schafer)*

Cultural Development – the ultimate objective of cultural development is to develop culture as a whole, and cultures as wholes, vis-à-vis the totality of development, which includes economic, political and social development, and how it affects the entire natural and historical dimensions of a community. *(D. Paul Schafer)*

Cultural Heritage – refers to singular qualities that give a community its character, names its essence, and provides for its collective meaning. It is found in form of objects, structures, museums, sites, landscapes, expressed in craft, visual and performing art, history, literature, oral traditions, and language. It is the embodiment of our behavior, which is organic and evolving. *(Vermont Arts Council)* Heritage is a complex term, broadly understood as the natural and cultural inheritance, the set of all things, places and ideas, of a community that holds special value and importance and defines its identity. *(Municipal Cultural Planning Project)*

Cultural/Heritage Tourism – focuses on the experience of visiting a place of genuine historic, cultural or natural significance. It is a road to discovery, an immersion in the natural history, human heritage, arts, philosophy, and institutions of another region or country. *(Canada Heritage and World Tourism Organization)*

Eco (nature-based) Tourism – “is environmentally responsible travel and visitation to relatively undisturbed natural areas, in order to enjoy and appreciate nature (and any accompanying cultural features – both past and present) that promotes conservation, has low negative visitor impact, and provides for beneficially active socioeconomic involvement of local populations.” *(The World Conservation Union, 1996)*

7.3 Culture and the Creative Economy on the World Stage

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) launched the *World Decade for Cultural Development* in 1988. A Commission was charged with the responsibility to rethink the development process throughout the world from a cultural perspective. The Commission discovered that development efforts often fail because, “the importance of the human factor – that complex web of relationships and beliefs, values and motivations, which lie at the very heart of a culture – had been underestimated in many development projects.”³⁸

Usually culture is overlooked, marginalized, and considered minor when it comes to building prosperity in our communities. However, there has been a significant rise in the focus of culture and creativity in development and community building over the past two decades.³⁹ Around the world and at the level of nations, regions, cities, towns and neighborhoods, creative industries appear as major components in cultural and economic development. In fact, “creativity” is the defining characteristic for the modern economy. (*Creative City Network*) Governments, policymakers, economists, and entrepreneurs are realizing that culture-centric development is a constructive, insightful, and productive means to build prosperity.

UNESCO is now taking on issues of sustainability with the Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (2005-2014), which focuses on environmental, economic, social, and cultural sustainability throughout the world, teaching individuals, institutions, and societies how to ensure improvement in quality of life today and for the future. These directives, though globally oriented, are locally applicable, and have significant relevance to the cultural development efforts in the St. John Valley of northern Maine.

Creativity, Innovation and Policy

*Now human creativity is the source of wealth and value.
Our human energy has replaced raw materials as the critical
factor in economic development. People are the resource.*

– Richard Florida, Economist

Government policy makers around the world are becoming increasingly aware that creative industries are important drivers of economic, cultural and social value. Not only do they create better places to live, but they generate jobs, create profit and promote local identities, thus ensuring diversity. In 2007, the European Commission adopted a policy statement on the central role of culture in a globalizing world – the first-ever European strategy for culture. It proposes measures to make culture an even stronger part of political dialogue with partner countries and regions around the world, promoting cultural exchanges and systematically integrating culture in development programs and projects.

In 2008 a group of professionals from ten different countries in Europe and Central Asia gathered at a conference in Kiev, Ukraine. They shared a common concern to better integrate creativity in their development agendas and recognized that the creative economy is an essential path toward development. Increasingly, culture is considered a tool for social policy to foster social inclusion, diversity, rural revitalization, public housing, health, ecological preservation, and sustainable development.

³⁸ UNESCO, *Our Creative Diversity*, Paris: 1998, p. 7

³⁹ Recognition of culture in development has been long considered relevant: “Development is not merely an economic or political concept; it is more fundamentally a process of culture and civilization.” *Report of the Scheveningen Symposium*, 1979.

In fact, the Norwegian government (directorate for development collaboration) considers that culture “is nothing less than a human right and an essential force for development.” They consider that supporting cultural heritage is a tool for achieving other development objectives such as fighting poverty.

Nongovernmental groups like Demos, a British think tank for “everyday democracy,” analyze social and political change, focusing on the challenge of realigning culture, politics and the public. In Canada, the Creative City Network launched the Centre of Expertise on Culture and Communities to research local cultural development as well as culture’s contributions to community sustainability. And finally, in Australia, the Centre at the University of Newcastle was established to provide a focus for research into cultural industries, their practice and role in the social and economic life of neighborhoods, cities, regions and nations.

Culture, Creativity and the Economy

Those communities that are richest in their artistic tradition are also those that are most progressive in their economic performance and most resilient and secure in their economic structure.

– John Kenneth Galbraith, Economist

Business and culture, often seen as mutually opposed, are uniting to create an entirely new economic landscape where creativity and culture are essential raw materials of the production cycle just as coal and steel have been since the industrial revolution. To remain competitive in today's economy, where manufacturing can be easily outsourced to other countries, what counts is creativity, design and innovation. Companies are therefore trying to distinguish themselves and their products by focusing on their creative skills and by building cultural value into their products. (*Creative City Network*)

The American Economist, Richard Florida, states that from 1980 to 2014, the creative sector in the United States will generate more jobs than in manufacturing and other blue-collar work today. The U.S. and other nations around the world need to make the transition “from industrial to creative societies by investing in their people, building up their creative capital, and remaining open, tolerant societies. We do this by tapping the full creative capabilities of everyone.”⁴⁰ Florida considers creativity as key to the economy – the economic engine of our time.

Being short in artists, writers, designers, intellectuals, engineers, and scientists, according to Shalini Venturelli of American University, means that the knowledge base for success is lacking and a resultant dependence on ideas produced elsewhere. The same value must be placed on the creative industries as has been on mining, agriculture and other traditional industries.⁴¹ By looking at culture and cultures more seriously, we are able to put economies in better context and point in the right direction for the future. D. Paul Schafer⁴², director of the World Culture Project, believes that the goal is to develop our culture and create environments conducive to creativity. The economy follows.

⁴⁰ Richard Florida, *Building a Creative Society*, 2005.

⁴¹ Shalini Venturelli, *From the Information Economy to the Creative Economy*, 2003.

⁴² D. Paul Schafer, *Culture: Beacon of the Future*, 1998.

ST. JOHN VALLEY CREATIVE ECONOMY PROJECT
University of Maine

(7.4) FOCUS GROUP SESSIONS SUMMARY REPORT⁴³
2008

Background

Rural communities throughout Maine are facing serious challenges, such as the decline of traditional industries, outmigration, an aging population, lack of diverse entrepreneurialism, and an attrition of cultural traditions. The St. John Valley of northern Maine experiences all of these challenges, along with many others, such as restrictive commercial growth as a result of being situated on an international border.

The St. John Valley, locally known as the “Valley,” is a rural, bilingual international region in Aroostook County at the northernmost tip of Maine, bordering the Canadian provinces of New Brunswick and Québec. There are approximately 15,000 people (85% of French heritage) in the twenty towns and townships that comprise the Valley. Portions of the St. John Valley fall within the Aroostook County Empowerment Zone, which has been characterized as a region with sparse population, severe winter weather conditions, a seasonal workforce of which close to three quarters lack a full-time job, and steady economic decline in its traditional manufacturing and commodity industries. At the same time, it is a region that is renowned for its authentic cultural heritage, its pristine waterways, forests, wildlife, and rare flora.

Over the past decade, there have been numerous efforts to build new foundations for economic prosperity in the region. As successful as these efforts are and have been, however, there is a great need for more strategic and sustained economic development. In regional forums held in the St. John Valley, regional leaders proposed that the Valley capitalize on its strongest, renewable, and inherent resources as means for economic development—its artistic traditions, cultural heritage, and landscape.

Many of these assets have come to be known as pieces of the ‘creative economy’ where the term “creative economy” refers to two economic factors: (1) the importance of creativity and creative workers in helping to create an entrepreneurial and innovative rural economy; and, (2) the recognition of arts and cultural assets as more than contributors to quality of place, but as important new sources of job creation in their own right.

Objectives

The central aim of the St. John Valley Creative Economy Project is to research and further expand economic development in the region, focused on the creative economy. The following project objectives are important components of this central aim:

1. identify readiness in the Valley for arts- and cultural-related business development and specific needs for technical assistance;
2. improve market information about visitors attending annual regional festivals and events;
3. develop a Creative Economy Business Plan that focuses on developing and/or expanding arts- and cultural-related businesses and tourism destinations;

⁴³ This report was produced by Caroline Noblet and Sheila Jans, members of the research team.

4. assess the desirability and feasibility of establishing a regional organization to oversee implementation of the plan and to foster the leadership, vision and capacity for regional planning necessary for successful achievement of the plan;
5. describe mechanisms for fostering rural innovation and entrepreneurship at UMFK and for residents.

The focus group sessions were intended to specifically address objectives (1) and (4) while providing input for objective (3).⁴⁴ With respect to objective (1), the focus groups were designed to obtain information not only on the individual and collective readiness for business development/expansion and or tourism development as well as technical assistance, but also the factors that inhibit growth in this sector, and what resources are needed to break down these barriers.

Methodology

The focus group component of the project consisted of three focus groups sessions in the St. John Valley (SJV) held in August of 2008; one session was held in Fort Kent, one in Madawaska and one in Van Buren. These three locations are considered the primary towns of the Valley, situated in the western, central and eastern parts of the region. Each town included the greater area. Participants were selected based on geographic residence, profession, community engagement, and representation of a relevant organization/activity. Sheila Jans, local cultural development consultant and the St. John Valley Creative Economy Advisory Council informed the selection of participants. Twelve respondents participated in the Fort Kent group, ten respondents participated in the Madawaska session and four participated in Van Buren.

Discussion was divided into 4 parts, corresponding to 4 sections of a series of questions on an overarching topic area⁴⁵: 1. The St. John Valley as a business location, 2. Obstacles to operating a business in the SJV, 3. Regional Planning and Information on marketing, branding and identifying SJV products, and 4. Opportunities and obstacles for tourism development in the SJV. Throughout these topic areas, participants openly shared their perspectives on current conditions in the Valley, as well as opportunities for the future. The culmination of the many opportunities for the future is included in 5. Visions for the Region.

Results

The St. John Valley as a business location

To open discussion on the St. John Valley as a business location, participants were asked to identify the inherent assets and resources of the Valley that could be leveraged to build prosperity and attract new entrepreneurs. Participants immediately identified two of what they perceive to be the region's strongest assets: (1) The Acadian cultural heritage, including the French language, and the community desire to preserve cultural traditions as well as way of life, and (2) The beauty of the St. John Valley's natural landscape, including a four-season climate, plentiful snow and water resources (e.g., St. John River and Allagash River).

Participants remarked that their shared cultural heritage, and desire to preserve tradition, led to a true sense of community, including a strong volunteer ethic in the Valley which has often been remarked on very positively by visitors. Participants viewed this sense of community as a draw to visitors seeking an 'authentic' experience in cultural traditions, or the outdoors. Additionally this combination of elements allows crafts and traditions of the area to remain distinct and unique, using techniques that are

⁴⁴ Research conducted by the U of Maine research team of Caroline Noblet, Sheila Jans, and Kathryn Hunt.

⁴⁵ Members of the regional advisory committee, as well as the research team, informed the questions contained in the moderator's guide.

indigenous to the people here. The combination of the beauty of the landscape and the community feeling has allowed for development of relationships with certain groups of visitors, such as snowmobile enthusiasts, cross-country skiers and dog-sledders. Visitors often remark on (and residents are well aware of) the distinctiveness of the Valley, because of its geography and culture: the Valley has maintained its sense of place and character.

Another asset that was identified by some participants is the proximity of the region to Canada, particularly the city of Edmundston, New Brunswick. Many participants viewed the approximately 50,000 Canadian citizens just across the border in New Brunswick as a potential asset for future economic development. Many also viewed the Valley's border with the Province of Quebec as an asset.

Primary Barriers Identified

- Acadian cultural heritage, including French language, desire to preserve tradition
- Sense of community, connection to family
- Sense of self-reliance and independence, low crime rate
- Landscape assets (weather, proximity to water resources)
- Proximity to Canada

Obstacles to operating a business in the SJV

Participants were also asked to identify some of the existing obstacles or barriers that citizens of the St. John Valley encounter when operating (or seeking to start) a business in the region. Participants returned to the issue of proximity to the Canadian border, as the St. John Valley's unique geography is seen as a double-edged sword. While proximity to Canadian markets was perceived as a potential asset, participants also indicated that due to international trade laws, the Canadian market is difficult to tap.

Participants indicated that it is difficult to cross the Canadian border with products for sale, and understanding the trade intricacies is prohibitively time-consuming for many entrepreneurs (e.g., it is very difficult to bring artists and performers across from Canada). Some of the larger businesses of the region have begun to make arrangements and contracts for easier flow of products, but this option is typically not available to smaller entrepreneurs.

Additionally, participants indicated that when Canadian citizens enter the St. John Valley region these visitors are limited in the amount of funds they can spend on U.S. made products, which again serves as an inhibitor to accessing the Canadian market. Many St. John Valley (SJV) businesses also find themselves competing against Canadian firms for the business of SJV citizens as well as Canadian citizens. Further, even though French is spoken on the American side of the border, there are many people who are either not completely fluent or are unilingual English. This can inhibit a level of full engagement in communicating in French, which is the language of the majority in Quebec and on the New Brunswick side of the border.

Finally, focus group participants indicated that the new passport requirements further discourage cross-border activities. Participants indicated that even within the state of Maine the geographic and cultural distinction which makes the Valley unique produces a conflict, making the Valley special, but also cut off from the rest of Aroostook county and the state, feeling isolated.

Given the focus of the group on the creative economy, many of the participants were small business owners engaged in the production of arts, crafts, cultural wares or hand-made products produced with Acadian traditions in mind. These small entrepreneurs indicated that one of the overwhelming barriers faced by many small artisans was the expense and expertise needed to sell their product into larger markets. Participants indicated that due to the small size of the St. John Valley consumer market (approximately 15,000 people) regional businesses need to tap outside markets in order to be successful.

Artisans and business owners found it difficult to sell their SJV produced products in other areas of the state, due to the travel expense associated with reaching larger markets. Many of the artisan products are best suited for tourism markets, however Maine's primary tourist areas are four or more hours by car from the SJV. Additionally participants indicated that they felt Maine's tourism focus was attracting visitors from the eastern seaboard of the United States and there was limited interest in attracting tourists from north of our borders.

Participants indicated that currently there was limited flow of St. John Valley produced products to larger markets in part because most artisans of the area attempted to sell or provide their products to these larger markets on their own, with limited coordination amongst producers. These small businesses have difficulty affording not only all of the supplies for the business, but the marketing required for sales and the travel expenses associated with selling their products to larger markets (ex: craft fairs in other parts of the state). Additionally, while many participants indicated that the World Wide Web would be a wonderful tool for expanding their customer base, participants indicated that many entrepreneurs in the area lacked the expertise, and financial ability, to place their products on-line. Those participants who utilized the web as a sales tool identified a number of barriers that entrepreneurs face. First, businesses typically must pay for products to be appropriately placed in search engines. Second, the time expense was also prohibitive for many small businesses in that entrepreneurs found it overly time consuming to create and maintain individual WebPages, while continually updating links to appropriate pages for their product.

Participants also identified a barrier with respect to consumer knowledge regarding the arts, crafts and traditionally produced products that are produced by St. John Valley businesses. Many participants indicated that consumers are often unable to identify the quality differences between, for example, a hand-made scarf and a mass-produced item. The inability of the consumer to differentiate based on quality, and therefore refusal to pay a premium price for hand-made or quality products, makes it difficult for many small entrepreneurs to continue producing their products.

Participants indicated that in conjunction with this lack of knowledge, there is a fear that the value of traditionally produced products, in line with Acadian heritage, may be primarily felt only in the older generations. Thus these products may not be attractive to younger consumers. This loss of youth interest in cultural heritage was also disturbing to participants from a community perspective, as fewer young adults are choosing to stay in the community and produce these traditional or artisan-crafted products. Participants felt that the school curriculum also failed to emphasize arts and culture, which contributes to the lack of interest from the younger generation. Participants indicated that the Valley is losing young residents and the youth audience for cultural products.

The discussion surrounding the barriers to entrepreneurship in the Valley including the concerns regarding youth retention and difficulty of small businesses operating on their own, also led participants to discuss a perceived lack of infrastructure in the area. As previously noted many entrepreneurs of the SJV feel that major markets are geographically far from the Valley. Additionally, the ease of traveling to the Valley is inhibited by the lack of transportation options into the Valley. Participants indicated that bus routes, and passenger trains do not routinely and reliably extend to the Valley and therefore limit the means by which potential consumers may visit the area. Participants also felt that this lack of transportation infrastructure may also contribute to youth retention issues as young people find it difficult to return home for visits, and begin to lose touch with their community.

Participants believe that the lack of infrastructure in the area inhibits the arrival of new entrepreneurs into the area. The St. John Valley currently lacks a showcase for local artisans and crafters to collectively display their products, which also may discourage other artisans from moving into the area. The Valley has a tradition of showcasing its artisan work (ranging from hand craft to food) at craft fairs. Once the

craft fair is over, it is nearly impossible to find hand made goods available for direct sale in the Valley. The general lack of support for art in the school system is perceived as a contributor to an overall dearth of knowledge and appreciation about how art and culture contributes to building prosperous communities.

The SJV also lacks a variety of food and entertainment establishments that are generally attractive to younger entrepreneurs. Many of the focus group participants felt that some of the infrastructure issues may be addressed if the towns of the St. John Valley were able to work in collaboration. However, a key additional barrier to entrepreneurship in the area identified by participants is the seeming inability for the local towns to work together.

Primary Barriers Identified

- Canadian Border
- Geographic distance/access to larger markets; lack of coordination amongst SJV artisans
- Lack of expertise/financing to utilize marketing tools (i.e., world wide web)
- Lack of consumer information regarding differences in quality
- Youth retention, as consumers and community members
- Lack of infrastructure (including lack of leadership)
- Lack of population

Regional Planning and Information on marketing, branding and identifying St. John Valley products

In discussing the expansion of business within the St. John Valley participants considered the type of regional planning that currently occurs, including any efforts to collaboratively market or brand the St. John Valley. Participants indicated that on the whole there was a lack of regional planning in the area. First, with respect to the regional planning organizations, participants felt that these entities were typically focused on larger business development and were ineffective in assisting small businesses and individual entrepreneurs. Participants felt that there is currently a lack of regional planning and support for small entrepreneurs.

Second, participants identified a missed opportunity for collaboration in the region's chamber of commerce structure. There is currently no shared St. John Valley Chamber of Commerce, each of the larger towns has its own chamber (i.e., Greater Fort Kent, Greater Madawaska, etc.), which serves surrounding communities. Additionally, participants indicated that many of these town based chambers lack continuity in their leadership.

Participants felt that this lack of collaboration amongst the towns, and a failure to plan on a regional level inhibited the ability of the region to attract economic development, grant dollars and to address some of the barriers indicated above. The majority of participants expressed disfavor at the lack of effectiveness of the regional development planning commission's role in supporting small business and individual entrepreneurs, and in general, helping to stimulate and sustain development for the region.

Given the perceived lack of regional planning, another area of interest was the identification of products from the St. John Valley region. The success of the "Made-in-Maine" label has prompted other regions within Maine to begin identifying their products and this may be an avenue of interest to the SJV. Participants indicated that the St. John Valley name is often used among community members to express the shared common bonds among residents with respect to culture and shared language. The term "St. John Valley" is also gaining increasing recognition within Aroostook County and the state. However, when speaking of their products only a few participants had heard local entrepreneurs use the St. John Valley in promoting their products and felt that more local businesses may use the term "Acadian".

Participants also indicated that some businesses, particularly those in the agricultural businesses, might use “Aroostook County” when describing their product because there is an existing knowledge of the County throughout Maine, and other parts of the Nation. However, many SJV citizens feel that the brand “Aroostook County” is often used to promote southern Aroostook products, without any emphasis on the separate identity of the St. John Valley or their Acadian heritage.

Regional Planning and Brand Identification

- Current lack of regional planning for small businesses, regional planners typically focused on larger businesses
- Lack of collaboration amongst towns, and town-based chambers of commerce
- Limited branding of area products

Opportunities and obstacles for tourism development in the St. John Valley

There was recognition amongst participants that many of the products produced in the Valley may not be desired by, or affordable to, local citizens but may sell well in premium markets that could be supported by increased tourism. An interest exists in the SJV to expand tourism in the Valley not only as an economic driver, but also as an opportunity to educate visitors about the cultural heritage.

For example, participants expressed that a possibility may exist to capitalize on the St. John Valley’s shared Acadian culture, much like portions of Louisiana have done with their shared Cajun ancestry. There is currently no broad name recognition associated with ‘Acadian’ and participants expressed interest in changing that.

In discussing tourism in the area, two schools of thought emerged from participants as they expressed their own views, and that of their neighbors. SJV citizens who have assets that may cater to the tourist industry (ex: rental properties, products for sale) may be very interested in expanding the number of tourists who visit the Valley across all seasons. Participants also noted however that citizens who were not involved in the industry might not enjoy an increase in visitors.

Tourism Obstacles and Opportunities

- Tourists provide premium market for products, frequent other area businesses
- Opportunity to capitalize on Acadian heritage and educate travelers
- Uncertainty regarding desire for tourism increase by all residents
- Lack of infrastructure, promotional and hospitality tools (also in relationship with Canada)

Visions for the Region

Throughout the focus group sessions, there was a particular interest in ideas for the future and specific needs that these St. John Valley entrepreneurs identified as important for moving forward. In this section, we reiterate specific needs or barriers that have been identified and identify participant ideas for success in these areas.

(a) Canadian Border

A barrier identified by participants was the difficulty in selling products across the Canadian border, due to customs regulations. Participants indicated that assistance for small business entrepreneurs from a nonprofit, or quasi-governmental agency would help remedy this situation. Something as simple as a brochure with contact information for customs officials on the Canadian and U.S. sides and steps to working through customs could assist businesses with success. On a larger scale, some participants envisioned a regional agency able to develop a contract for the collaborative sale of St. John Valley produced products into the neighboring Canadian market.

Additionally, participants were interested in tourism cross advertising with their Canadian neighbors, utilizing the St. John River as a connection (for example: The Cities of the Androscoggin have tied the towns of Lewiston and Auburn). Initiatives such as *Voici the Valley Cultureway* use the shared Acadian (French) heritage from both sides of the river. Participants proposed tourism ideas such as a passenger train along the river, with stops along both sides of the border.

(b) Access to larger markets; lack of coordination amongst SJV artisans and lack of expertise/financing to utilize marketing tools

One of the primary barriers identified by entrepreneurs in the Valley was small business owners feeling they are “on their own”, in accessing larger markets and utilizing tools to expand their product’s reach. The tradition of self-sufficiency in the Valley with a sense of self-reliance, and a deep connection to family has enabled this region to survive, but it has also contributed to its challenges. The financial and time expense of creating and maintaining a website was too daunting for many entrepreneurs, and yet the World Wide Web was identified as a key means to accessing larger markets. Participants identified the need for a ‘one-stop-shopping’ Internet site for all St. John Valley products.

Participants felt that a regional entity dedicated to small business growth could create, host and maintain the website and use the website as a means to market their services and products and where appropriate, market the brand name of ‘Acadian’ products. Focus group participants desired additional workshops and trainings for small businesses to help entrepreneurs learn how to create business plans specifically geared for culturally based products and market their product or service effectively. Consumer inability to differentiate quality products may be partially mitigated by targeted marketing, education and the continued collaborative use of the “Acadian” name.

(c) Current lack of regional planning for small businesses, regional planners typically focused on larger businesses

In discussing the specific needs of the St. John Valley entrepreneurs it became evident that to achieve many of these opportunities for the future, the SJV requires entities dedicated to regional thinking, ready to assist the small business entrepreneur and explore new economic development paradigms for the region. Participants indicated that one great need that could be met by such entities, which is currently lacking, is assistance with grant writing for smaller businesses. Entrepreneurs need assistance identifying appropriate granting agency for their size and efforts, as well as thorough review of grant proposal before they are submitted.

Participants also indicated that a community loan fund may be beneficial in assisting new entrepreneurs in the region, or expansion opportunities for existing opportunities. Participants indicated that small business entrepreneurs frequently have difficulty obtaining credit from traditional sources. A community loan fund, administered by a regional planning entity, would begin to address this need. Participants mentioned the success of the Grameen Bank, founded by Nobel Prize winning economists Muhammad Yunus, which is built on the concept of community loans for small entrepreneurs.⁴⁶

Additionally, participants indicated that an entity dedicated to regional thinking may be able to help spread prosperity from one existing area event into other portions of the region. For example, participants suggested that the Can-Am Sled Dog Races held in Fort Kent, could be coupled with activities in other towns to maximize visitation of the area. A regional entity would be best positioned to organize across towns to leverage existing assets into economic development opportunities.

⁴⁶ Additional information on the Grameen Bank can be found at www.grameen-info.org

Summary and Conclusions

The primary objective of these focus group sessions was to identify readiness in the St. John Valley for arts- and cultural-related business development and specific needs for technical assistance. Participants were able to provide extensive information on the existing barriers to development, and specific needs they require in overcoming these obstacles. They clearly identified a need for increased collaboration; amongst artisans and small business entrepreneurs, as well as among the local governmental entities (towns, chamber of commerce, regional economic and development offices).

There is an expressed desire to work together as a region. Participants recognize the need for an environment that will cultivate leadership and help sustain the levels of creativity and innovation needed for the region's future. Participants indicated that St. John Valley entrepreneurs need assistance with business plans, getting products and services on-line, distribution, product differentiation/marketing, grant writing and dealing with Canadian customs. The need for infrastructure development was also identified including the potential development of a community loan fund.

The second objective of these sessions was to assess the desirability and feasibility of establishing a regional organization to foster the leadership, vision and capacity for regional planning. Participants clearly identified a need for regional planning in the area, having identified the current individual-town planning structure as a barrier to economic development. Many of the specific needs and growth activity suggestions put forth by participants may best be accomplished by such a regional entity.

ST. JOHN VALLEY CREATIVE ECONOMY PROJECT
University of Maine

(7.5) PERSONAL INTERVIEW SUMMARY REPORT
2009

Objectives

To complement three regional focus group meetings, one-on-one interviews were conducted over a three-month period (from November 2008 – January 2009).⁴⁷ The first set of interviews included ten professionals (town managers, a selectman, chamber of commerce directors, an educator, a state legislator, two federal legislative representatives, and a financier). These people were interviewed to gain more direct and personal insight about the assets, challenges, and opportunities for the region. Interviews were generally 1-1.5 hours in length and conducted in person.

The second set of interviews included five young people in the region (one having been part of a focus group meeting last summer). Three are in their senior year of high school, one is living in southern Maine, and another is a first year student at the University of Maine at Fort Kent. Questions focused on gaining insight into what is important to them specifically, and to youth in general, about the St. John Valley. Interviews were about 35 minutes long and were conducted by person and by telephone.

Results

The one-on-one interviews with people in the region proved very fruitful because they were personal and inspired a higher level of comfort and candidness. All too often, genuine thoughts on an issue are not revealed in large groups. Personal discussions in a relaxed setting encourage useful and relevant opinions and observations.

Professionals

Discussions with a diverse range of professionals were productive. They shared candid thoughts on a range of topics about the economic stagnation of the region and frustrations about the territorial nature of the towns and blockages that impede progress. Equally, there were constructive ideas about what could work in the region such as the possibility for a regional entity and the importance of paying more attention to what the region does well and creating an environment with positive attitudes. Interviewees shared the following:

Assets

- Community, family, culture, French language – *“historical societies are gatekeepers of our future.”*
- Peacefulness, safe – *“has to be acknowledged as positive and precious.”*
- Affordable housing market.
- Natural environment, four seasons (eco-recreational activities have highest potential).
- Volunteerism – *“there’s a lot of free labor.”*
- University and community colleges.

⁴⁷ Research conducted by Sheila Jans, member of research team.

Tourism

- Have high potential to become a tourism destination – *“we’re experiencing a transition from a focus on natural resources to a tourism-based economy.”*
- Packaged incentives – *“we’re not doing a good enough job to help those people who have to travel a long way to get here.”*
- Funding streams don’t find their way to the Valley.
- Tourism agencies aren’t doing their job.

Connection with Canada

- Connection to Canada is mostly emotional and historical.
- An international experience not fully explored .
- Double-edge sword – *“our biggest asset is to our north”* and *“the border is fear based.”*
- Interaction is diminishing due to passport restrictions – *“at one time it was an asset to be next to Canada, but now it seems to make no difference – the US made it difficult to travel back and forth and the amenities in Canada are better, so why bother coming here?”*
- Additional barrier is communication (French language) and lack of knowledge about activities and opportunities on other side of the border.
- Difficult to gain State support to invest in the northern regions to do business with Canada.

Challenges

- Collateral is difficult to attain for many artisans in order to secure loans.
- Arts and culture are under the surface – *“we don’t see arts and culture as industries.”*
- Lack of local support – *“if something is made here, the perception is it’s not good.”*
- Low population.
- Lack of diverse entrepreneurialism– *“the paper mill has negative effect on attitude and creates a sense of rivalry.”*
- Towns are territorial and focus only on survival – *“municipalities don’t do enough to inspire investment,”* and *“the concept of a region exists, but we get caught up in petty things.”*
- People are parochial, generally afraid of failure and change – *“there’s lots of naysayers – it’s our own attitudes that are difficult to overcome.”*
- Paradoxical – *“People will help you when you’re down in life, but if you get ahead, they’ll cut you off at the knees.”*
- Lack of good transportation system adversely affects tourism, shipping and selling products
- Lack of leadership – *“we’re lacking good people in charge,”* and *“we don’t support or cultivate our leaders.”*
- The State perceives the Valley as a problem – *“we’re considered as a welfare drag on the state.”*
- Ineffectiveness of the Northern Maine Development Commission – *“it focuses more on its own survival,”* and related groups – *“Aroostook Partners for Progress tends to be Central/Southern Aroostook-centric.”*
- Relying too much on volunteers.
- Retaining and attracting youth is difficult – *“they get educated at UMFK but move on.”*
- Accommodations and hospitality are generally below par.
- Services and products aren’t linked with activities – *“ATV drivers want hot tubs, but motels won’t invest.”*
- Health care is expensive – *“people can’t afford it so move to get better jobs.”*

Opportunities

- Market our distinctness – distinct tourism region.
- Pool resources to promote the region – a regional marketing strategy (“Made in the Valley”)
- Diversify the economy– *“we can be proud of the mill but we need to go beyond it.”*
- Specialized services and products in the woods industry.

- Increase organic farming and grow different crops
- Public/private sector collaborations (e.g., micro-loan/grant program)
- Regional entity is needed and possible
- Greater support to events that are successful (e.g., Acadian Festival)
- Attract snowmobilers at another time of the year
- Link museums with bus tours (and across the border), link bike trails with museums
- Bring in outside investment (gain more corporate sponsors like FairPoint Communications)
- Unified regional chamber of commerce
- Business people more involved in civic issues and create stronger networks
- UMFK more involved on a curriculum level with development, linking with public schools
- Attract business with Internet (more .com businesses)
- Distribution center/clearing house for goods and services
- Develop more value added services and specialized niche products
- Commercial port in Van Buren and Madawaska
- International newspaper
- Link services and products with activities (e.g., Allagash canoers want to learn about history)
- More Main Street programs
- Pay more attention to the St. John River and the TransCanada Highway

Youth

Young people are a primary concern when it comes to planning and development, but rarely are they consulted and included in direct discussions. The effort to include them in a series of one-on-one interviews in this project was fruitful. They identified the beauty of the landscape as a major asset, as well as the French and Scots-Irish culture. There is a great desire for the interviewees to either remain in the region or someday return to it (after university). Their connection to the St. John Valley is rooted squarely on its peacefulness, wildness, safety, family, and authentic culture. However, they, along with their friends, know all too well the challenges of making a living in the region. The reality of that hardship discourages them from staying or returning. Further, they are discouraged by the lack of activities for youth and the dearth of diversity.

And yet, youth are conflicted when push comes to shove, “the Valley is a valuable place – it’s the only place where I’ve been completely relaxed”. One interviewee returned from Orono because he could get the same education at UMFK and missed the nature, open space, and family. And yet, another young person expressed it this way, “I can live better in the Valley with the same amount of money I’m earning in Bar Harbor – but the differences has to do with the amenities. Two other teenagers said they’d want to come back to offer something unique and to protect the culture (“I can see myself coming back to offer something that doesn’t exist already”) Given their love of this place, they are realistic, “Young adults are leaving not because they wouldn’t like to stay, but because it’s not viable to stay.” Interviewees shared the following:

Assets

- Character of the people, family– *“we know where our home is”*, pace of life, strong work ethic.
- Nature – *“the cycle of harvest and life is the same year after year.”*
- Culture (the French language is tied to every day life).
- Familiar and close knit – *“there’s no tricky roads.”*

Challenges

- “Old-fashioned” – *“like a slide frozen in time.”*
- Not enough going on (few places to hang out, things to do).
- Disconnect with what’s happening “out there.”
- Far from a lot of things, not enough people (don’t get the chance to meet new people).

- Volunteerism has its limits – *“we rely too much on volunteers; we need more professionals doing the work and this would help with job creation.”*
- Festivals are small and may not be relevant.
- People are fatalistic and good at complaining – *“no one expects anything to work because if it didn’t work in the past, it won’t work now,”* and *“keep taxes low without investing - so what if we don’t grow, don’t bother.”*
- Stress of the mill closing has a negative effect.

Canada

- Go mostly for shopping and movies (one teenager was forbidden to cross over).
- Increased border restrictions impact the desire to cross.
- Canada is a valuable asset – *“it’s odd that we feel so isolated and rural and the bulk of Canada is just across.”*
- The lack of knowledge of French isn’t considered a problem.

Opportunities and Needs

- More vibrant streets and retail choices – *“we need places where we can go for a great cup of coffee, listen to music and see art,”* and *“no one wants to come to a town with only a few places to go to.”*
- Places to convene as young people.
- Better ways to learn French – *“it’s a real loss that we’re not developing this more.”*
- More specialized services (e.g., dog-sitting, food co-ops).
- Better transportation and ease of getting in and out of the region – *“do we want to focus on I95 for tourism, leisure, economic development or utilize the Trans Canada better,”* and *“I feel trapped.”*
- Protection of the culture – *“we can’t maintain the culture if the people are leaving”* and *“the culture is a terrible thing to lose.”*
- Expand the services of the university.
- Stable work, create more businesses that can be done anywhere.
- Wind energy and green jobs.
- Diversity – *“we need more people doing different things.”*
- Invest in and diversify the logging industry.
- Community forests, cycling routes, and strategies to take advantage of Allagash Waterway.

ST. JOHN VALLEY CREATIVE ECONOMY PROJECT
University of Maine

(7.6) ACADIAN FESTIVAL INTERCEPT SURVEY SUMMARY REPORT
2008

Introduction

One of the primary objectives of the USDA funded Rural Business Opportunity Grant for the St. John Valley, a project which has come to be known as 'St. John Valley Creative Economy Project, was to improve market information about visitors attending cultural/nature based festivals and events in the Valley. This synopsis of findings from an intercept survey conducted in June 2008 of the Acadian Festival will provide information on the visitors to the Festival. This information may be useful to festival organizers to help focus advertising dollars, and consider Festival activities that may be of interest to the demographics currently attending the festival or assist in identifying opportunities to expand the Festival.

Methodology

The Margaret Chase Smith Policy Center of the University of Maine is spearheading the St. John Valley Creative Economy Project. On June 27th and 28th 2008, two researchers ⁴⁸ administered intercept surveys regarding the Acadian Festival in Madawaska, Maine. The researchers visited four sites that included components of the Festival: 1. Main Street in Madawaska the site of the Bed Races on Friday June 27th, 2. The Landing Site which held the historical reenactment on Saturday June 28th, 3. The Multi Purpose Building which held family entertainment opportunities on Saturday June 28th and 4. The Four Corners Park where the dedication of the Four Corners Park Monument occurred on Saturday June 28th. In total 82 intercept surveys were completed. The results of these surveys are summarized below.

Who Were the Visitors – Demographics

Location/Geography

Visitors to the festival represented twelve states and the province of New Brunswick, Canada. Of the visitors surveyed 61% were residents of Maine including 28% from the town of Madawaska, 9% who indicated they were from the general area (including Fort Kent, St. Agatha and other local towns) and 24% from other Maine locations. Additionally, 32% of visitors were from out of state including 7% from Canada. The majority of out of state visitors hailed from Connecticut, but visitors as far as Florida, Mississippi and Iowa were also interviewed.

Age and Gender

The average age of a festival participant was fifty-eight years old. The majority of respondents fell in age between 45 and 64 years old. Of interest however, approximately 22% of survey participants indicated they were 70 or older. Additionally, only 4 % of participants were under the age of 35. Female participants constituted 60% of survey visitors interviewed, males 40% and both genders were represented across all age categories, although more of the 70+ participants were female.

⁴⁸ Researchers were: Caroline Noblet, School of Economics and Margaret Chase Smith Policy Center; Marilyn Mann, Center for Tourism Research and Outreach (CenTRO) at the University of Maine.

Income and Education

The estimated average income for the survey participants interviewed was \$70,560.⁴⁹ Participants indicated that approximately 37% of visitors earn an income between \$50,000 and \$150,000. Of interest, 50% of participants reporting the two highest income categories were from out of state, and 20% were from in town. With respect to educational attainment, thirty-five percent of respondents held a high school diploma (or GED) and 26% held a college degree.

Attendance at Festival

One question of particular interest to the current study included: Was the Acadian Festival the primary purpose of your trip to the St. John Valley? Thirty-four respondents (42%) indicated that it was not their primary purpose. However, analysis of the data reveals that twenty-two of those people were area residents. Additionally, five people indicated that their primary purpose was to attend the Guerrette family reunion, and two people indicated they were in the Valley for the Four-Corners park dedication, both activities which were part of the festival.

With respect to prior attendance at the Festival, 45% of survey participants indicated they had not previously attended the Festival. Of these respondents, 54% were from out of state but of interest 38% were from the state of Maine, but not from the St. John Valley region. Additionally, of these first time visitors 30% indicated they would definitely or likely return to the Festival, 41% may return to the festival⁵⁰. Seventy-eight percent of these first time visitors did indicate that the festival was the primary purpose of their trip to the St. John Valley and that they were primarily drawn by the Guerrette Family reunion or the four-corner park dedication. Return visitors to the Festival appear to be very loyal. For those who have visited the festival previously, the average number of previous visits was seven. These repeat visitors are primarily local, as 60% of returning visitors are local or area residents who attended the festival last year.

Important Factors and Satisfaction with Visit

Survey participants were asked to indicate how important ten factors were in their decision to attend the festival, on a scale of 1 (not important) to 5 (very important). Below are five factors where 45% of participants or more indicated that this factor was very important (percents indicate the number of participants indicating factor is very important):

- 1) Quality of Music/Performances (45%)
- 2) Attend a Family Gathering (46%)
- 3) For Family Entertainment (48%)
- 4) Attend the Historical Events (49%)
- 5) Attend the Guerrette Family Reunion (51%)

Visitors were also asked to comment on how much they would agree with a statement on a scale of 1 (completely disagree) to 5 (completely agree) regarding their satisfaction with different aspects of their visit to the Festival and the St. John Valley in general. Below are statements where 40% of respondents indicated complete agreement:

- 1) I plan to attend the Festival next year (41%)
- 2) I am satisfied with the historic events of the Acadian Festival (45%)

⁴⁹ Twenty-three people chose not to answer this income question.

⁵⁰ Respondents were asked to indicate on a scale of 1 to 5 their likelihood of return. A '5' indicates definitely would return and '1' indicates definitely would not return. A score of '4' was interpreted as likely to return, a '3' as may return and a '2' as unlikely to return.

- 3) I am satisfied with the exhibits of the Acadian Festival (46%)
- 4) I am satisfied with the performances of the Acadian Festival (46%)
- 5) I am satisfied with the eating establishments in the area (51%)
- 6) I am satisfied with my visit to the Acadian Festival (76%)
- 7) I would recommend this Festival to others (85%)

Opportunities

Based on the information collected in the intercept survey, the Festival may have opportunities to enhance the festival and the number of visitors attending. First, the current demographic covered by the festival is an older generation. An opportunity may exist to attract young families to the Festival with more family friendly events. Those currently attending the festival indicated that the performances, historical events and family entertainment were important to them and that they were satisfied with these aspects of the Festival. An opportunity exists for Festival organizers to attract the grandchildren of current attendees.

Second, there are a limited number of visitors from the rest of Maine. This may suggest an opportunity to market the Acadian Festival more broadly to other areas of Maine, particularly those with Acadian or French heritage. Third, the Family reunion is seen as a crucial component of the Festival that draws many visitors to the event. The Town and the Festival organizers may have an opportunity to provide more goods and services to the visiting family members. While approximately 35% of respondents indicated that they were satisfied with the arts/cultural product available for purchase in the area, 24% were uncertain. This may indicate an opportunity for more culture based arts and products to become part of the Festival.

Finally, many survey participants provided comments to the survey effort. Many of the comments congratulated the committee on their hard work and excellent event. Additional comments provided suggestions for future years on a few reoccurring themes. First, participants indicated that the historical and cultural aspect should be the focus of the Festival, and suggested additional events celebrating these aspects.

Several participants commented on the need to better advertise the exact timing of the landing event, and the need for improved communication (particularly volume) at the Landing event. Second, survey respondents felt that more of the events could take place downtown as the Festival felt spread out. Suggestions included more Acadian food booths, cultural vendors and music. Finally, another theme focused on potential tours of other historical sites in the area to be included in the Festival.

ST. JOHN VALLEY CREATIVE ECONOMY PROJECT
University of Maine

(7.6) TOUR DE LA VALLÉE INTERCEPT SURVEY SUMMARY REPORT
2008

Introduction

One of the primary objectives of the USDA funded Rural Business Opportunity Grant for the St. John Valley, a project which has come to be known as ‘St. John Valley Creative Economy Project, was to improve market information about visitors attending cultural/nature based festivals and events in the Valley. This synopsis of findings from an intercept survey conducted in August 2008 of the Tour de la Vallée will provide information on the visitors to the Tour. This information may be useful to organizers to help focus advertising dollars, and consider ride-related activities that may be of interest to the demographics currently attending the Tour or assist in identifying opportunities to expand the Tour.

Methodology

The Margaret Chase Smith Policy Center of the University of Maine is spearheading the St. John Valley Creative Economy Project. On August 17th, 2008 two researchers⁵¹ administered intercept surveys regarding the Tour de la Vallée based in Fort Kent, Maine. In total 92 intercept surveys were completed. Eighty-five percent of survey participants were riders of the Tour (of these riders, 31% from out of Valley), 13% were spectators from the local area, and 2% were spectators from outside the St. John Valley region. The results of these surveys are summarized below.

Who Were the Visitors - Demographics

Location/Geography

Visitors to the Tour were primarily from the St. John Valley area (73%). Twenty-seven percent of survey respondents came from areas outside of the Valley, but only 3% from outside of Maine.

Age and Gender

The average age of a survey participant was forty-six years old. Twenty –two percent of respondents were between the ages of 35 to 44, and 35% of respondent were between the ages of 45 and 54. Female participants constituted 36% of survey visitors interviewed, males 64% and both genders were represented across all age categories, although more of the 55+ participants were female.

Income and Education

The estimated average income for the survey participants interviewed was \$80,170⁵². Participant responses indicated that approximately 65% of visitors earn an income between \$50,000 and \$150,000. With respect to educational attainment, 51% of participants held a college or technical school degree, 17.4% had attended some college or technical school and 18.5% had achieved a graduate degree.

⁵¹ Researchers were: Marilyn Mann and Ana Zivanovic, Center for Tourism Research and Outreach (CenTRO) at the University of Maine. This report was written by Caroline Noblet, U of Maine.

⁵² Five people chose not to answer this income question.

Attendance at the Tour

One question of particular interest to the current study included: Would you have come to the St. John Valley if the Tour de la Vallée had not been held? Of the 27% of respondents who were from outside the Valley, 50% indicated that they would *not* have come to the Valley without the Tour.

The remaining out-of-Valley survey participants indicated that they had family or friends in the Valley that would have drawn them for a visit regardless of the Tour's occurrence. A second question of interest regarding out-of-Valley visitors was: At another time, are you likely to visit the St. John Valley for your vacation? Sixty-five percent of the out-of-region survey participants indicated yes, they would visit the Valley at another time for vacation.

With respect to prior attendance at the Tour, 28% of survey participants indicated they had *not* previously attended the race. Of these respondents, 14% were from out of the St. John Valley region. Additionally, of these first time visitors *all* indicated they were likely return to the Tour, and *all* indicated they would recommend the Tour to others. Return visitors to the Tour appear to be fairly loyal. For those who have visited the festival previously, the average number of previous visits was seven. These repeat visitors are primarily local, as 80% of returning visitors are St. John Valley region residents.

Survey participants were also asked how they heard about the Tour de la Vallée ⁵³. Seventy visitors heard about the Tour from friends or family, while 27 visitors heard about the event from Northern Maine Medical Center. Fifteen participants learned of the event from bicycling organizations and 14 heard about the Tour from news coverage or print advertising.

Important Factors and Satisfaction with Visit

Survey participants were asked to indicate how important four factors were in their decision to attend the Tour, on a scale of 1 (not important) to 5 (very important). Below are the factors with percents showing the number of participants indicating the factor was 'very important' in their decision.

- 1) Support of Cancer Fund (78%)
- 2) Quality Bicycle Touring (41%)
- 3) Quality Scenery or Landscape (35%)
- 4) Setting in the St. John Valley (60%)

Visitors were also asked to comment on their satisfaction with different aspects of their visit to the Tour and the St. John Valley in general on a scale of 1 (not satisfied) to 5 (very satisfied). The percents below represent the percent of respondents who were 'very satisfied' with this aspect of their experience. Given the large number of in-Valley respondents, we have also chosen to report the percent of people who indicated this factor was not applicable to them.

- 1) Quality of Eating Establishments (27%); NA=16%
- 2) Quality of Cultural Experience (48%); NA=12%
- 3) Quality of Tour Layout (49%); NA=1%
- 4) Scenery and Landscape (68%); NA=1%
- 5) Quality of Lodging (5%); NA=91%
- 6) Overall Tour Experience (72%); NA=3%
- 7) Distance Traveled to Attend (26%); NA=66%

⁵³ Survey participants could indicate more than one source of information.

The current study was also interested in whether the Tour visitors remained in the area and availed themselves of other local activities or services. Of the out-of-Valley visitors, 56% indicated they would not be engaging in other activities during this visit. Of the visitors who indicated they would engage in other activities, the primary activity was visiting family/friends in the area. The study was also interested if any 'lost opportunities' existed, whereby visitors were looking for products and services not currently being provided. We received very limited responses to our query of 'Are there services or products not available in this area that you would have liked to purchase?' Sixty-five percent of respondents did not think this question was applicable to them, and 28% did not have any products/services they would have liked to purchase in the area. Of the 4 respondents who provided information, the only response was a bicycle shop.

Opportunities

Based on the information collected in the intercept survey, the Tour may have opportunities to enhance the number of visitors attending and the length or breadth of their stay. The survey data indicates that the majority of visitors to the Tour are local citizens. An opportunity may therefore exist to attract riders from out of the Valley potentially by offering additional activities the weekend of the Tour. Many out-of-Valley visitors indicated they would be staying in the area to visit family/friends. However, other out-of-Valley visitors clearly arrived only for the race on Sunday without utilizing local lodging or other services.

Thus a potential exists for these visitors to partake of more local products or services (ex: restaurants, shops, etc.) if they can be enticed to stay for the entire weekend rather than just race day. Given that the quality of the scenery and the St. John Valley setting were important to respondents, opportunities may exist to have additional tours of the Valley, highlighting areas of particular scenic or cultural notability, available to visitors to promote longer visits. Additional outdoor activities may also be of interest to the demographic attending the Tour (i.e. canoe trip). The opportunity to purchase sports and outdoor related products, including cycling products, may also be of interest to Tour attendees as well as Valley residents who come to Fort Kent for the Tour.

ST. JOHN VALLEY CREATIVE ECONOMY PROJECT
University of Maine

(7.6) CAN-AM CROWN INTERCEPT SURVEY SUMMARY REPORT
2009

Introduction

One of the primary objectives of the USDA funded Rural Business Opportunity Grant for the St. John Valley was to improve market information about visitors attending cultural/nature based festivals and events in the Valley. This synopsis of findings is from an intercept survey conducted in February 2009 at the Can-Am Crown, an international sled dog race held annually in Fort Kent. The intercept survey represents data from 210 attendees, which will provide information on visitors to the race. This information may be useful to race organizers to help focus advertising dollars, and consider activities which could run concurrent with the race that may be of interest to the demographics currently attending the race or assist in identifying opportunities to expand.

Methodology

The Margaret Chase Smith Policy Center of the University of Maine is spearheading the St. John Valley Creative Economy Project. The Center is collaborating with the University of Maine Fort Kent on components of this initiative.⁵⁴ On February 28th, 2009 faculty from the University of Maine Fort Kent, Leo Trudel, along with undergraduate students administered intercept surveys regarding the Can-Am International Dog Sled Race based in Fort Kent, Maine. In total 210 intercept surveys were completed. Nineteen percent of survey participants identified themselves as race officials or volunteers, 39% identified themselves as spectators from the St. John Valley, 39% identified themselves as spectators from other areas of Maine, or from outside of the state or nation.⁵⁵ The results of these surveys are summarized below.

Who Were the Visitors - Demographics

Location/Geography

Visitors to the race represented six states and the province of New Brunswick, Canada. Of the visitors surveyed 87% were residents of Maine. Additionally, 13% of visitors were from out of state including 4% from Canada. Out of state visitors hailed primarily from Massachusetts or Connecticut but visitors as far as Florida were also interviewed.

Age and Gender

The age of race visitors held a skew towards younger respondents. Twenty-three percent of visitors reported their age as falling between 18 and 24 years old, 13% were between 25 and 34%, 21% reported ages in the 35 to 44 and 45 to 54 category, with the remaining respondents indicating ages over 55. This age distribution is of particular interest when compared to the age of visitors to other events in the area: 22% of survey participants for the Acadian Festival indicated they were 70 or older. Female participants constituted 47% of survey visitors interviewed, while 51% of respondents were male.

⁵⁴ This report was written by Caroline Noblet, University of Maine, with data supplied by the University of Maine at Fort Kent.

⁵⁵ The remaining 3% indicated they were race competitors.

Income and Education

Participants indicated that approximately 50% of visitors earn an income less than \$50,000. With respect to educational attainment, fourteen percent of respondents held a high school diploma (or GED) as their highest level of educational attainment and 28% held a college degree.

Attendance at the Race

With respect to prior attendance at the Race, 79% of survey participants indicated that they had previously attended the Can-Am Crown (generally referred to as the Can-Am), 93% of respondents would return to the Can-Am in the future and 96% would recommend the Can-Am to others. Return visitors to the race appear to be very loyal. For those who have visited the event previously, 15% have attended ten or more of the races. Of additional interest was attendance by visitors from outside the immediate area. Seventy-eight visitors answered the question “If you are NOT from the Fort Kent area, would you have come to the St. John Valley if the Can-Am had NOT been held?” Of interest, 90% indicated that they would have come to the area even if the Can-Am had not been held.

Respondents were asked to identify how they came to hear about the Can-Am Crown during the survey process. Thirty-three percent of respondents indicated they learned of the race through friends and/or family, while 29% had read an article in a newspaper or magazine, or other print advertising, 14% had heard of the event due to broadcast coverage and 10% from a dog sledding organization, with the remaining respondents indicating it was another source not previously stated.

Important Factors and Satisfaction with Visit

Survey participants were asked to indicate how important four factors were in their decision to attend the festival, on a scale of 1 (not important) to 5 (very important). Below are the factors where percents indicate the number of participants indicating factor is *very* important:

- 1) Uniqueness of Event (52%)
- 2) Opportunity to watch the dogs (49%)
- 3) Quality Scenery or Landscape (44%)
- 4) Setting in the St. John Valley (44%)

Visitors were also asked to comment on how satisfied they were with certain aspects of their visit to the Race and the St. John Valley in general on a scale of 1 (not satisfied) to 5 (very satisfied). Below are the aspects where percents indicate the number of participants indicating the aspect of their visit was *very* satisfactory:

- 1) Quality of Eating Establishments (40%)
- 2) Quality of Cultural Experience (50%)
- 3) Quality of Race Layout (62%)
- 4) Scenery and Landscape (56%)
- 5) Quality of Lodging (38%)
- 6) Overall Can-Am Experience (72%)
- 7) Distance Traveled to Attend (54%)

Respondents were also asked if they were likely to visit the St. John Valley at another time for vacation. A majority of non-area resident visitors indicated that they would visit the region at another time for vacation.

The current study was also interested in whether Can-Am Crown visitors remained in the area and availed themselves of other local activities or services. Forty-five percent of respondents indicated they would be engaging in other activities during this visit. Of the visitors who indicated they would engage in other activities, the primary activities were other winter-sports activities such as skiing, snowshoeing and snowmobiling. The study was also interested if any 'lost opportunities' existed, whereby visitors were looking for products and services not currently being provided.

We received very limited responses to our query of 'Are there services or products not available in this area that you would have liked to purchase?' Twenty-nine percent of respondents chose not to answer this question, and 55% did not have any products/services they would have liked to purchase in the area. Of the 16% of respondents who provided information, the responses were primarily related to higher quality, or more variety in, eating establishments. However, respondents also noted the lack of area-specific memorabilia.

Opportunities

Based on the information collected in the intercept survey, the Can-Am Crown organizers may have opportunities to enhance the number of visitors attending and the length or breadth of their stay. First, the current demographic covered by the event is a younger generation. An opportunity may exist to expand aspects surrounding the race with more family friendly activities, which in turn may draw a greater audience. Additionally, previous surveys of cultural events in the St. John Valley area have indicated that older generations tend to participate more in cultural events. An opportunity may exist to add additional cultural heritage components to the race in an effort to attract the parents, and grandparents of current race attendees.

Second, the survey data indicates that the majority of visitors are local citizens, with a limited number of visitors from Southern and Central Maine. This may suggest an opportunity to market the Can-Am more broadly to other areas of Maine. Given that only 29% of the spectators reported that they were from Maine (outside the Valley) there clearly is an opportunity for expansion.

One potential method of expansion may be to offer other outdoor related activities over the race weekend, as those currently attending the race indicated such activities were of interest to them. Thus there may be an opportunity for the Can-Am to contribute even further to the local economy by drawing more fans, for a longer time period. Local citizens may also have an opportunity to provide more goods and services to visiting race fans. Respondents commented on the lack of restaurant variety, but also importantly the lack of memorabilia related to the area (not specifically the race). An opportunity may exist for local producers to step into this void.

ST. JOHN VALLEY CREATIVE ECONOMY PROJECT
University of Maine

NORTH AMERICAN CUP AND NATIONAL BIATHLON CHAMPIONSHIP
INTERCEPT SURVEY SUMMARY REPORT
2009

Introduction

One of the primary objectives of the USDA funded Rural Business Opportunity Grant for the St. John Valley was to improve market information about visitors attending cultural/nature based festivals and events in the Valley. This synopsis presents findings from an intercept survey conducted in March 2009 at the cc in Fort Kent from March 19th to 22nd. These two events feature amateur athletes competing in Nordic ski racing and rifle marksmanship (hereafter “Biathlon” to represent both the Cup and the Nationals). Since 2002, the Maine Winter Sports Center (10th Mountain Ski Lodge) in Fort Kent, occasionally hosts these events as part of a national competition circuit. The intercept survey represents data from 93 attendees, which will provide information on visitors to the biathlon. This information may be useful to Biathlon organizers to help focus advertising dollars, and consider activities which could run concurrent with the Biathlon that may be of interest to the demographics currently attending the event or assist in identifying opportunities to expand.

Methodology

The Margaret Chase Smith Policy Center of the University of Maine is spearheading the St. John Valley Creative Economy Project. The Center is collaborating with University of Maine Fort Kent on components of this initiative.⁵⁶ On March 21st faculty from the University of Maine Fort Kent, Leo Trudel, along with undergraduate students administered intercept surveys regarding the Biathlon. In total 93 intercept surveys were completed. Ten percent of respondents identified themselves as biathlon competitors, 19% percent of survey participants identified themselves as race officials or volunteers, 20% identified themselves as spectators from the St. John Valley, 38% identified themselves as spectators from other areas of Maine, and 13% were spectators from out of the state or nation. The results of these surveys are summarized below.

Who Were the Visitors – Demographics

Location/Geography

Visitors to the Biathlon represented nine states and two Canadian provinces (Nova Scotia and New Brunswick). Of the visitors surveyed 76% were residents of Maine including 23% from the town of Fort Kent. Additionally, 24% of visitors were from out of state including 11% from Canada.

Age and Gender

The age of Biathlon visitors was primarily concentrated between 35 and 65 years old, however 13% percent of visitors reported their age as falling between 18 and 24 years old. This age distribution is consistent with the finding from other events based in Fort Kent, which found that a younger fan base tends to attend outdoor sporting events, while cultural events draw an older crowd.⁵⁷ Female participants constituted 42% of survey visitors interviewed, while 58% of respondents were male.

⁵⁶ This report was written by Caroline Noblet, University of Maine with data supplied by the University of Maine at Fort Kent.

⁵⁷ Comparison made to intercept survey results from: 1) 2009 Can-Am Crown Race, 2) 2008 Acadian Festival and 3) 2008 Tour de la Vallée.

Income and Education

Participants indicated that approximately 60% of visitors earn an income between \$50,000 and \$150,000, with an additional 13% reporting household incomes greater than \$150,000. This indicates that the Biathlon appears to draw a fan base with higher average household income than many of the other local events surveyed, and bears similar income statistics to the Tour de la Vallée. Interestingly, 75% of respondents attained a college degree or higher. Of the events in the St. John Valley area, this average educational attainment is the highest reported. These demographics may present opportunities for the Biathlon, which will be discussed in a later section.

Attendance at the Biathlon

One question of particular interest to the current study included: Would you have come to the St. John Valley if the Biathlon events had not been held? Of the 65 respondents who were from outside the Valley, 40% indicated that they would *not* have come to the Valley without the Biathlon. A second question of interest regarding out-of-Valley visitors was: At another time, are you likely to visit the St. John Valley for your vacation? Sixty-three percent of the out-of-region survey participants indicated yes, they would visit the Valley at another time for vacation.

With respect to prior attendance at the Biathlon, 44% of survey participants indicated they had *not* previously attended Biathlon events in Fort Kent. However, return visitation to the Biathlon has been growing since the start of events, particularly since 2004. Only 15% of respondents indicated they had attended Biathlon events in the area in 2003, however 46% had attended in 2004. The number of return visitors has continued to grow across time, resulting in 63% of 2009 survey participants indicating that they had attended Biathlon events in Fort Kent in 2008. Additionally, 91% of respondents indicated they are likely to return to the Biathlon events next year, and 99% would recommend these events to others.

Survey participants were also asked how they heard about the Biathlon events.⁵⁸ Fifty-nine visitors heard about the events from friends or family, while 48 visitors heard about it from Biathlon organizations. Thirty participants learned of the event from the 10th Mountain Skiing Lodge website, and 34 read articles in newspapers or magazines.

Important Factors and Satisfaction with Visit

Survey participants were asked to indicate how important four factors were in their decision to attend the Biathlon, on a scale of 1 (not important) to 5 (very important). Below are the factors where percents indicate the number of participants indicating factor is *very* important:

- 1) Uniqueness of Event (54%)
- 2) Opportunity to watch Maine athletes (54%)
- 3) Quality Scenery or Landscape (52%)
- 4) Setting in the St. John Valley (50%)

Visitors were also asked to comment on how satisfied they were with certain aspects of their visit to the Biathlon and the St. John Valley in general on a scale of 1 (not satisfied) to 5 (very satisfied).

Below are the aspects where percents indicate the number of participants indicating the aspect of their visit was *very* satisfactory:

⁵⁸ Survey participants could indicate more than one source of information.

- 1) Quality of Eating Establishments (29%)
- 2) Quality of Biathlon Layout (73%)
- 3) Scenery and Landscape (68%)
- 4) Quality of Lodging (42%)
- 5) Overall Biathlon Experience (66%)
- 6) Distance Traveled to Attend (44%)

The current study was also interested in whether visitors remained in the area and availed themselves of other local activities or services; 65% of visitors indicated they would be engaging in other activities during this visit. The study was also interested if any 'lost opportunities' existed, whereby visitors were looking for products and services not currently being provided. We received very limited responses to our query of 'Are there services or products not available in this area that you would have liked to purchase?'

Thirty-one percent of respondents did not think this question was applicable to them, and 78% did not have any products/services they would have liked to purchase in the area. Of the limited respondents who provided information, an increase in quality lodging and restaurants was the primary desired goods/services.

Opportunities

Based on the information collected in the intercept survey, the Biathlon events may have opportunities to enhance the number of visitors attending and the length or breadth of their stay. The survey responses indicate that a number of Maine citizens, from outside of the St. John Valley area are currently attending the Biathlon events and that attendance continues to be on the rise. Given that 38% of respondents indicated they were Maine spectators (outside the region) it appears that the Biathlon is well on the way to attracting visitors from Southern and Central Maine, a feat that many of the other events held in the area have been unable to achieve. The Biathlon may wish to invest in promotional materials in other New England states in order to increase the number of out-of-St. John Valley visitors to the event, as current efforts to market the event in Maine appear to have met with success.

Additionally the results indicate that the Biathlon attracts a wealthier, and more educated crowd than other events held in the area. The Biathlon may be able to enhance the number of visitors, while contributing even further to the local economy by hosting events that would appeal to this set of demographics. Future survey efforts may wish to identify events that current Biathlon spectators would be interested in attending if held in concert with the Biathlon (e.g., collaborate with cultural groups to feature displays, performances, etc.).

Though the locus for the Biathlon is in Fort Kent, this event has regional impact. Organizers have an opportunity to work with other communities in the St. John Valley to support the Nordic skiing experience (e.g., Four Seasons Lodge in Madawaska already has a strong affiliation with Maine Winter Sports Center).

ST. JOHN VALLEY CREATIVE ECONOMY PROJECT
University of Maine

(7.7) CULTURAL SITE VISITOR SURVEY SUMMARY REPORT
2008

Introduction

The St. John Valley Creative Economy Project is an initiative of the Margaret Chase Smith Policy Center of the University of Maine. The project’s working group is undertaking a series of research and planning tasks focused on strengthening opportunities for creative economic development in the St. John Valley. One of the primary objectives of this USDA funded Rural Business Opportunity Grant, was to gain market information about visitors attending cultural sites in the region. This synopsis of findings from a cultural site survey conducted from June to September 2008 will provide information on the number of visitors to these sites, where they are from, and when they are visiting.

Methodology

A survey form was sent in the mail and electronically to sixteen cultural organizations (which for the most part, operate museums) in the St. John Valley in July, 2008.⁵⁹ In total 10 surveys were completed (with two additional sites providing limited information by telephone). The results of these surveys are summarized below.

How many visitors?

<i>Establishment</i>	<i>Location</i>	<i># of Visitors</i>
Acadian Archives (UMFK)	Fort Kent	2,000
Acadian Village (Notre Heritage Vivant)	Van Buren	525
Allagash Historical Museum (Allagash Historical Society)	Allagash	86
Centre Français de la Vallée St-Jean (Le Club Français)	Madawaska	150*
Eagle Lake/Winterville Historical Society	Eagle Lake	n/r
Fort Kent Block House	Fort Kent	5,570
Fort Kent Historical Museum (Fort Kent Historical Society)	Fort Kent	245
Frenchville Historical Museum (Frenchville Historical Society)	Frenchville	n/r
Governor Brann Museum	Cyr Plantation	n/r
Greater Grand Isle Historical Society	Grand Isle	---
Musée culturel du Mont-Carmel (Assoc. cult. et hist. du M-C)	Lille	61
Ste-Agathe Historical Museum (Ste-Agathe Historical Society)	Ste-Agathe	400
St. Francis Historical Museum (St. Francis Historical Society)	St. Francis	200
St. John Historical Museum (St. John Historical Society)	St. John	n/r
Spruce Row Gallery	Ste-Agathe	217*
Tante Blanche Museum (Madawaska Historical Society)	Madawaska	n/r

* received information by telephone, form not completed
n/r = no response

⁵⁹ Research was conducted by Sheila Jans, member of research team.

Total number of visitors

9,454 + 10% variable = 10,399

A variable of 10% is added to compensate for the five sites that did not respond to this survey, people who do not sign registers, one person signing for an entire family, and sites that do not keep a definitive record of visitors. The total number of visitors represents most of the sites surveyed for June - September, though one respondent (Fort Kent Block House) provided figures from May to October.

Monthly breakdown of visitors

June 2,298 (based on 8 respondents)
July 2,695 (based on 8 respondents)
August 2,446 (based on 8 respondents)
September 1,648 (based on 7 respondents)

The remaining 367 visitors are from those sites that supplied only an estimation of their total number of visitors without a monthly breakdown.

Origin of visitors

Data are incomplete as to where most visitors originate from, however, those locations listed below are common to majority of respondents (8 of 9 completed forms):

Maine (several locations including the Valley), Connecticut, Ontario, Quebec, New Brunswick, Vermont, New Hampshire, Pennsylvania, New York, Wisconsin, New Jersey, Massachusetts, Florida, France, Arizona, North Carolina, Virginia, South Carolina, British Columbia, California, Ohio, Texas, Tennessee

Number of volunteers

73 (based on 8 respondents – these figures also refer to those who serve on board of directors)

Number of paid staff

15 (based on 7 respondents)

Paid staff includes work-study students, part-time, full-time and seasonal. The majority is seasonal.

Operating dates

Mid-June to mid-September: 5
Mid-May to mid-September: 1
Mid-May to end of October: 1
Year round: 2

The majority of historical museums are open from mid-June to mid-September.

Operating hours

The majority of historical museums are open either daily with restricted hours (such as 1-4 pm or noon to 5 pm), or limited days of the week (i.e. Tuesday to Sunday; closed on Saturday). The Fort Kent Block House is open daily (at varying hours) from May to October. The Acadian Archives at the University of Maine at Fort Kent is open year-round from 8:30-4:30 pm.

ST. JOHN VALLEY CREATIVE ECONOMY PROJECT
University of Maine

(7.8) NEEDS ANALYSIS SURVEY SUMMARY REPORT
2009

Introduction

The St. John Valley Creative Economy Project is an initiative of the Margaret Chase Smith Policy Center of the University of Maine. The project's working group is undertaking a series of research and planning tasks focused on strengthening opportunities for creative economic development in the St. John Valley. One of the primary objectives of this USDA funded Rural Business Opportunity Grant, was to collect information to learn more about the status and needs of people working part-time and full-time in the creative economy.

Methodology

The needs analysis survey was developed in collaboration with the Northern Maine Development Commission (NMDC) in January 2009.⁶⁰ The survey was available on-line through NMDC's website and in hard copy through standard mail. One hundred-fifty direct electronic and mailed notices were sent to individuals and businesses in the region. The survey was promoted through direct electronic letters to artists and creative businesses in the region, notice on the NMDC website as well as on the project's webpage on the University of Maine at Fort Kent's website, a press release, public service announcements, and notification of chambers of commerce (one chamber inserted a notice into its newsletter). The deadline for survey participation was the end of February, 2009.

The survey targeted creative professionals and commercial enterprises, such as artists, craftspeople, graphic designers, jewelry makers, woodworkers, furniture makers, artisans, food producers, musicians and performers, website designers, software developers, and so on. It also included services that support the economy such as consulting, sound production, transportation, event planning, or distribution. Twenty-one questions were posed, designed to take about 7 minutes to complete.

Results

Twenty-seven people participated in the survey (all but one survey was completed on-line). Thirty-six percent identified themselves as a self-employed artist or freelancer, 36% as representing a commercial business, and 30% represented a nonprofit organization.

Most participants described their creative economy endeavors as providing services in writing (18%), fine and visual arts, and natural/organic products (both at close to 13%). The primary products, activities and services that participants offered fell in the categories of nonprofit organizations, management, entertainment, hospitality, equipment suppliers, retail, publishing and space rental. The majority of respondents (89%) indicated that their activities occur in the St. John Valley followed by 3% in the Eastern United States. Currently, participants indicated little activity in the rest of Aroostook, southern Maine, Western U.S. and into Canada.

⁶⁰ Research was conducted by Sheila Jans, member of research team in collaboration with Rod Thompson of the Northern Maine Development Commission.

They indicated a strong desire expand their services to include central and southern Aroostook, the rest of Maine and New Brunswick. When asked how the product or service gets to market, most participants use either self-delivery or surface shipping.

The ten most important needs that participants indicated to grow their business or service included (in order of most important): technical assistance and e-commerce training, public relations and communications, marketing and design, distribution, business and computer skills, organizational and business planning/management, financial and strategic planning, and artistic skills and training.

Items that are key to growth, the ten most important were positive and supportive attitudes, followed by market and consumer information, networking, financing and capital, marketing/distribution/agent contacts, product/service development, partnering, competitive products and services, component/raw material suppliers, and tradeshow and promotions. Sixty-seven percent of participants indicated an interest to participate in a business incubation program that focuses on developing their activity.

Fifty-two percent of respondents indicated that their creative work was their primary occupation with most being active for more than twenty years (followed by 1-5 and 5-10 years). The majority is 45-65 years of age (72%), full-time employed, and earn a gross income of less than \$10,000/annum from their creative activity (67%). Most indicated a combined household income of less than 25,000 (31%) or \$25,000 - \$45,999 (31%). Eight respondents have a combined income between \$46,000 - \$99,000, with only 1 respondent of more than \$150,000 per annum.

Twelve participants provided additional comments that further explained their work, challenges and aspirations. Comments include frustration that grants are not available to artists north of Bangor, the high level of creativity combined with socially responsible attitudes for a children's store, and the desire to sell hand-made textiles on-line.