

## **Antigonish leads the way to a new model for economic growth**

A number of years ago an energy economist working in the upper echelons of the federal government, made a passing remark of interest. During a conversation about the state of the economy in Atlantic Canada when he said, "Let me know if you come up with a new solution to the region's problems, we're fresh out of ideas up here in Ottawa." He wasn't kidding.

Neither are we.

The Antigonish area is rising to the challenge. A new and powerful force for economic growth is forming in Antigonish. Responding to the resolutions of the delegation at the Antigonish Economic Summit, the Antigonish Area Partnership Launch Committee has been formed and is now working towards fulfilling the community's instructions. The committee consists of fifteen community leaders who have agreed to dedicate themselves to the task of establishing a private-public partnership for the Antigonish area.

On May 6, 2003, our community came together at the new Charles V. Keating Millennium Centre, on the campus of St. Francis Xavier University in Antigonish, and took positive action to begin the process of creating a bold initiative for small communities in Canada. Our business community not only joined forces on the floor, but also injected fully 75% of the cost of mounting the actual Summit and associated events. This was a strong investment of confidence in the project and, moreover, the community. The balance of the funding came from the local municipal units and ACOA.

The Summit organizers set out to create the most productive and representative community consultation in the Antigonish area since the days of Moses Coady and Jimmy Tompkins. We developed a program that responded to many concerns that have been expressed by community stakeholders for many years. We provided the community with a compendium of hard data that spelled out the area's assets and challenges. Therefore, at this Summit, all participants operated from the same knowledge base.

As the result of a comprehensive selection process, more than 130 delegates representing over 30 local stakeholder groups gathered at Keating Millennium Centre for the Antigonish Economic Summit. It is fair to say that, in the history of Antigonish, there has never been a gathering of such a diverse and powerful group.

We enjoyed an unprecedented atmosphere of cooperation and consultation among all of the major economic sectors in our community. The delegation included the Mayor of the Town of Antigonish, The Warden of the Municipality of the County of Antigonish, the MLA for Antigonish, The President of St. Francis Xavier University, county and town councilors, as well as the President and Members of the Chamber of Commerce, and citizens from all walks of life including the legal, medical and accounting professions, businesspeople, students, farmers, fishers, academics, administrators, trades people, labour union executives, agriculture and resource industry representatives, members of the tourism industry, artists representing all media, educators, clerics, recreational and sports advocates and many others.

Dr. Michael J. MacDonald served as Summit Chair. Among his many achievements, Dr. MacDonald has been a leader in the development and successful operation of private-public partnerships for economic growth, most notably the Greater Halifax Partnership.

The Summit was host to Leonard G. Lee, founder and Chairman of Lee Valley Tools. Mr. Lee, who created one of Canada's great business success stories, was the keynote speaker for the event. Mr. Lee gave an inspiration address in which he suggested a number of opportunities he recognized in his short stay in the Antigonish area. He also laid out how his company's culture values the customer and empowers the employee resulting in a powerful formula for success.

The Summit was structured to address three topics. The first was devoted to the theme, "Antigonish Town and County Here and Now." A panel of three individuals, plus the balance of the delegation, discussed the current state of the Antigonish area. The discussion brought out interesting perspectives on why people chose to either remain in or locate in this community of 20,000 people. The single greatest positive factor in decision-making, identified by almost all participants, was the quality of life typical of our community. Most of the participants agreed with the theme, "I can make more money in a larger centre, but I would have to compromise my lifestyle. I like it here."

All the same, meaningful employment and economic opportunity were very high on the priorities list for the delegates. The Summit agreed that as a community, we must strive to find ways to enhance our economy while not adversely affecting the quality of life offered in the Antigonish area.

The second topic was devoted to "Challenges and Opportunities". A new panel was put into action as the delegation discussed strengths, weaknesses opportunities and threats. There were some striking observations during this session. The most powerful concern addressed fragmentation within the community. The delegation overwhelmingly asked for positive action based on closer cooperation between all area stakeholders.

Other concerns included shifting demographics and an aging community, highway realignment, the development of the energy industry, the health of resource based industries, and concern for the integrity of our natural environment and the promotion of tourism.

Many opportunities came to light. With our major assets in the fields of education and health care, the Antigonish area was identified as having significant potential for a broad spectrum of research and commercialization projects employing these assets. St. Francis Xavier University was recognized as the single most powerful economic force in the community – due not only to its cash flows, but also, more importantly, to its contribution of our most valuable resource – educated, energetic and bright young people. Conversely, retaining and attracting skilled, educated young adults was highlighted as one of the area's greatest challenges.

Over several decades, Antigonish has relied upon and benefited from a very stable economy by virtue of the traditional employment mix in the community. In addition, the Antigonish area has been quick to embrace many new opportunities, and is one of the most "wired" communities in Canada. The delegates recognized, however, that the traditional contributors to our stability are being challenged in many ways. The reduced availability of public sector employment, radical changes in many agriculture and resource-based industries, significant shifts in public policy and the relentless aging trend in the population pose serious challenges to the traditional economic

base of the area. As the economy evolves, we must be able to both address and manage change. The last third of the Summit addressed that topic.

The final session sought to challenge the delegation to deliver, to the community, resolutions for action. The delegation was essentially asked to "...describe what kind of partnership would be most useful to realize the results of the Summit and to guarantee the future prosperity of the community."

The response was overwhelmingly unified. The delegation instructed the community to become unified, proactive, and energetic through the establishment of an appropriately designed private-public partnership. The evaluation forms returned by the delegates contained clear and nearly unanimous instructions to "get on with it" and "form a partnership" as soon as possible.

The benefits for the future of the Antigonish area are clear. With a broad base and investor participation, the partnership will be able to coordinate action and deliver tangible benefits in a variety of areas including marketing and promotion, statistics and market intelligence, networking, and in forming strategic alliances that will greatly assist in the creation of new opportunities for economic growth in the Antigonish area.

Considering the very strong support the Summit received from the business community and the municipal units, there is little doubt that the fulfillment of the launch process will result in the delivery of the Antigonish Area Partnership financed by its private and public investors and working in concert with the community.

The Antigonish tradition of leadership in socio-economic action, with roots deep in the Co-op Movement, provides a natural springboard for this innovative and challenging project. This tradition is one of the many treasures of our community. The citizens of the Antigonish area agreed to move boldly ahead with an innovative solution to the challenges and opportunities faced by our community. It may well serve as a model for many other communities in our region and in our country. This is a nation building initiative.