

Summit seeks solutions to rural-county problems

By Richard Ryman

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Northeastern Wisconsin's rural counties are an outdoor paradise. A place to go on the weekends and to retire to.

They also are places where people live and strive to raise families, and that's become increasingly difficult as factories have closed and budgets have become tighter.

"A number of things are happening in the counties north of Green Bay and many of those things are very traumatic economic changes," said James Golembeski, executive director of the Bay Area Workforce Development Board.

Using the Northeastern Wisconsin Economic Opportunity Study as a base, an economic summit at The Four Seasons Resort in Pembine will seek to develop a plan to deal with some of those developments.

"The summit is an attempt to pull together community leaders to begin to talk about these issues, organize around them and develop a plan rather than just let things happen to us," Golembeski said.

The study, sponsored by The Bay Area Workforce Development Board and the Fox Valley Workforce Development Board and conducted in 2004, looked at a 17-county region. Golembeski said the October summit will focus on results for six of those counties, including Florence, Forest, Menominee, Shawano, Marinette and Oconto.

Among its findings:

- Labor force participation is 64 percent, compared to 73 percent statewide. Labor force participation is the percentage of people 16 years and older who have jobs or are looking for jobs. Some counties, such as Florence at 46 percent, are even lower.
- The combined average unemployment rate is 8.4 percent, compared to 4.5 percent statewide.
- The average per capita income is \$23,134, compared to \$30,685 statewide.
- The poverty rate is 13 percent, compared to 9 percent statewide.

Generally, the economic study suggests that regional collaboration will be more effective solving economic problems than local initiative.

"One of the main things is just making people aware this is a region. Our work forces commute back and forth and our tax dollars commute back and forth," said Don Clewley, executive director of the Marinette County Association for Business and Industry.

Northwoods Economic Summit

• **What:** Daylong facilitated discussion to develop aggressive action plan to guide economic growth in rural Northeastern Wisconsin counties.

• **When:** 8:30 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. Oct. 4

• **Where:** The Four Seasons Resort, Miscauno Island, Pembine

• **Cost:** \$25. Includes continental breakfast and lunch

• **Information:** Call Jim Golembeski at (920) 431-4102 or e-mail jgolembeski@bayareawdb.org

?A buyer in Hong Kong doesn't care where the rivers are,? he said.

In that vein, representatives of Menominee and Dickinson counties in Michigan have also been invited to the summit.

As an example of the regional impact, Clewley said the Northwoods quality of life is used to recruit businesses to the Fox Valley to the south.

The economic study suggests that Northeastern Wisconsin economic development must rely less on natural resources and cheap transportation and more on jobs that add value to commodities made elsewhere. It says the region must develop a culture of risk-taking and collaboration, and seek to build around industry clusters, such as paper.

Golembeski said a high number of retirees in the Northwoods counties is creating some unique problems. It reduces the work force participation level and means fewer school-age children and less support for investment in schools.

At the same time, it drives up property values, which cause a loss in state-aid funding.

The Florence School Board, facing a severe budget shortfall because of those reasons, has voted to disband its district.

Golembeski said property values in areas such as Abrams and Lakeland are accelerating in similar ways.

?Florence is the canary in the mineshaft,? he said.