

Plan envisions 'new economy' in Ulster County

By Joshua Rinaldi, Freeman staff

STONE RIDGE - A plan to guide Ulster County's economic progress for the next several years suggests the county abandon the search for a large manufacturer to carry the economy, as IBM did for four decades.

It urges instead that the county focus on tourism, agriculture, renewable and environmentally friendly technologies, and on a thriving arts and creative sector to stimulate smaller growth in several places.

"It's a new economy. It's not the manufacturing economy of the IBM days," Bob Ryan, chairman of the board of directors of the Ulster County Development Corp., said at the unveiling of the plan Wednesday night at Ulster County Community College.

The new economic focus was the last of four goals and 12 strategies (see accompanying list) outlined in "Ulster Tomorrow: A Sustainable Economic Development Plan for Ulster County." The plan was months in the making, stemming from a three-day strategy session in October.

In the interim, a task force has been analyzing the data and creating the plan. A crowd of about 200 filled the student lounge at the college's Vanderlyn Hall Wednesday evening to listen to and sound off on the plan.

Ulster County still needs to recover from the shock of IBM's departure in 1995 and seek its economic future in a multitude of small gains rather than one large boom, Ryan said.

"We're still living in IBM days. That's gone and they're not coming back," Ryan said at a meeting with the Freeman editorial board Wednesday afternoon. "Nobody is going to bring 2,000 jobs to Ulster County. It's not going to happen. We're going to get our small chunks. That's how we're going to rebuild here."

Overcoming the loss of IBM was a recurring theme as officials representing the development corporation, the Industrial Development Agency and the Ulster County Planning Board discussed the plan Wednesday evening. Among the plan's strategies are streamlining permit and review processes for project applicants and offer more financial support for start-up businesses. March Gallagher, chairwoman of the county's Industrial Development Agency, said those two items are key.

"It can take up to three years or never to get a project done," she said.

The new plan follows a 2004 economic plan by the development corporation, which Gallagher described as a "plan that called for a plan." Irene MacPherson, interim president of the development corporation, said the shortcomings of the former plan nudged the corporation into action to create a more in-depth plan that tells the county how to achieve its goals.

Following Wednesday's presentation, Todd Ravinet, an Olive resident and vice president of the Kingston-based manufacturer Ameribag, said the plan didn't seem much different than it had in the past. What has changed, Ravinet said, is the attitude.

"If they can keep up even a similar level of enthusiasm, I think they can be successful," Ravinet said.

Others were more skeptical. One woman voiced concern about the need to attract jobs with living wages and said the plan didn't address that issue. Joseph Deegan, a Kingston-based commercial developer, said the plan needs some way for local municipalities to express which industries they desire, because they control the local zoning laws.

Ron Marquette, vice chairman of the development corporation's board of directors, said the public needs to have some faith that the latest plan is not the same old thing. But he did acknowledge the need for some quick results. "We need a few successes," he said to the Freeman editorial board. "Until that begins to happen, the man on the street is not going to believe it."

Feedback from Wednesday evening's event will be considered before the final report is released March 20. The development corporation will be the lead agency in helping to implement the recommendations of the report, but other agencies will be involved, planners said. Some strategies can be imple-



Jennifer Fuentes, a member of the Ulster County Industrial Development Agency board, asks a question during Wednesday evening's economic forum.

mented within a year; others could take as many as five.

The Ulster County Development Corp. is expected to hire a new president within weeks. Ryan said all finalists have been briefed on the strategy, and the new president will be expected to help carry it forward.

ULSTER TOMORROW HIGHLIGHTS

THE sustainable economic development plan for Ulster County is divided into 12 strategies within four groups. The plan is the result of months of studying data collected from a team of collaborative juries in mid-October that sought to identify the county's strengths, weaknesses and goals.

The county has released the final draft of the plan, though the drafters did take comments from individuals Wednesday night, and those comments will be considered before the final plan is issued March 20.

The Ulster County Development Corp. will be the lead agency for advancing the plan, but other organizations may be put in charge of certain sections.

The groups and strategies are as follows.

Group 1: Engaged Leadership

1. Cultivate a community of leaders to guide efforts.
2. Create a culture of change and collaboration.
3. Develop measured accountability.

Group 2: Doing Business for Prosperity

4. Target assistance to emerging businesses.
5. Redesign services network.
6. Streamline local permit and review process.
7. Develop appropriate infrastructure.

Group 3: Ingredients for Success

8. Preserve and enhance quality of life.
9. Recruit a diverse business base.
10. Retain and expand existing businesses.
11. Create a labor force capability in line with business needs.

Group 4: Targeting Key Sectors With Strategic Partners

- 12a. Enhance the travel and tourist industry.
- 12b. Maintain economic viability of agriculture.
- 12c. Develop strategic advantage in green and renewable technologies and products.
- 12d. Nurture a creative economy.