

by Peter L. Judkins
Franklin Savings Bank

Bringing Jobs to Western Maine



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Western Maine has been experiencing difficult times as the economic base transitions and many of the region's past manufacturing jobs have been lost. Even the paper industry, the last major industry that still provides manufacturing jobs, is relatively unstable. According to the July 2006 Maine Labor Market Digest, unemployment rates in Maine average 4.2 percent. Unemployment rates in western Maine range from 5.6 percent to 6.7 percent. The national unemployment rate for the same period was 4.7 percent.

Many western Maine communities are what the Maine Department of Economic and Community Development would call "vulnerable communities," or communities that have one dominant employer or taxpayer. Wilton, in Franklin County, is a vulnerable community that is still working to recover from devastating the loss of Bass Shoe, which moved its headquarters and many of its manufacturing jobs in the early 1990s.

The towns of Rumford, Jay, Skowhegan, and Madison are also vulnerable communities because their tax bases and employment opportunities are tied to the paper industry. The paper mills in Jay and Rumford were recently sold, and although the mills are expected to continue to operate in the near future, the long-term outlook and the level of employment are uncertain.

Many of the people living in and around these towns either work at the mills or are in some way dependent on them for their livelihood. For example, loggers and foresters are affected by mill closure, as demand for their products decline and prices become so low that it is not economical to harvest the wood. Retail establishments also derive much of their business from the mill workers and others who support the industry. If the paper industry in Maine continues to weaken, the region's economy will suffer even more.

A Big Employer Leaves

For more than a decade, the Camden-Belfast area flourished because of credit-card company MBNA's Maine-based call center operation.

Starting in 1993, when MBNA established its Northeast Regional Marketing Center in Camden, the company increased the size of its Maine-based workforce to about 2,500. A report generated by the Maine State Planning Office in June 2004 listed it as the fifth largest employer in the state. In addition to the nearly 1,700 jobs supporting the regional center, MBNA operated call centers in Farmington, Fort Kent, Portland, Presque Isle, Orono, and Brunswick.

That all started to change following the January 1, 2006, purchase of MBNA by Bank of America, which decided to maintain most Belfast positions but to close the facilities in Farmington, Fort Kent, Portland, and Presque Isle the following March. When the Farmington call center closed, approximately 95 people lost their jobs.

Greater Franklin Development Corporation

Into the breach came the Greater Franklin Development Corporation (GFDC), an economic development group that has long worked diligently to retain jobs and bring in new ones. When it was announced that MBNA would close Farmington, GFDC didn't waste any time trying to attract a new company.

With assistance from Franklin Savings Bank, GFDC approached Bank of America about purchasing the MBNA building. Franklin Savings Bank pledged to support the project in the form of a low-interest loan and a grant from the bank's Community Development Foundation to cover the carrying cost for six months. Bank of America representatives were sensitive to the town's concern about jobs and offered the building to GFDC for a reasonable price.

With control of the building, GFDC began the process of seeking an employer to fill the space. Working with Maine and Company, a private organization that assists businesses looking for a new location, and with the state's Department of Economic and Community Development, GFDC was able to identify several potential occupants. Ultimately, it reached an agreement with NotifyMD, Inc., the nation's largest enabler of call-center-based messaging services for health-care provider organizations.

Several of NotifyMD's senior managers visited the site and were impressed—both by the building and by the reception that they received from GFDC and community leaders. Shortly after the managers' first visit, negotiations began on leasing the building. The result was a three-year lease agreement and a business plan calling for 45 jobs at the outset—with the likelihood of 200 jobs by the end of the second year.

NotifyMD has six domestic call centers offering both after-hours answering services and daytime call management. The Farmington center will be used to accommodate daytime service to allow physician practices to manage nonurgent inbound messages in a secure environment while preserving the live voice interaction.

By working together, GFDC and Franklin Savings Bank were able to meet their missions of supporting the community and helping it grow.

Peter L. Judkins is the president and CEO of Franklin Savings Bank in Farmington, Maine.

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