



## **Franklin County Tourism Network** **Planning Team Meeting 12/11/08**

Attendees: Chris Beach and Lloyd Griscom, High Peaks Alliance; Forrest Bonney, Maine Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife; Chris Colin (guest), Unity College; Marc Edwards, Franklin County Cooperative Extension; Betty Gensel, Coastal Enterprises, Inc.; Alison Hagerstrom, Greater Franklin Development Corp.; Fred Hardy, Franklin County Commissioner; Bruce Hazard and Shaunacy Cobb, Mountain Counties Heritage; Dina Jackson (phone), Androscoggin Valley Council of Governments; Evelyn McAllister, Rangeley Lakes Region Chamber of Commerce; and Lorna Nichols, Franklin County Chamber of Commerce.

**High Peaks Alliance presentation** The meeting began with a presentation from Chris Beach about the High Peaks Alliance's backcountry trail system and the Maine Appalachian Trail Land Trust's High Peaks Initiative. He started his presentation with a video about the High Peaks region created by Chris Collins, one of his students at Unity College.

The High Peaks Alliance is a group of local citizens with a vision for the High Peaks region (stretches from Weld to the Bigelows) that connects communities through a backcountry trail system. They believe that planned residential and commercial development in the ring of existing communities (Rangeley, Phillips, Carrabasset Valley, and Eustis) and resorts surrounding the High Peaks will succeed in combination with conservation to secure the area for timber harvesting and four-season backcountry recreation. They are providing a forum for local people to consider different perspectives (motorized vs. non-motorized recreation groups) and share ideas about projects like new multiple-use backcountry trails and improved landowner relations. Lloyd stressed that these conversations start with mutual respect and cooperation to find common ground. Chris also mentioned the need to brand the area and actively promote it as a region.

There were questions about the Navy land coming into play with the closing of the Brunswick Naval Air Station. Chris explained that there has been no conversation about this land becoming available and that it will continue to be a survival training ground. It is his understanding that if the Navy were to give up the property, it would be first available to government uses, then non-profits to purchase, and finally private businesses.

Bruce was interested in the planning aspect since there has never been a fully developed plan for the area (best places for development, set aside for timber harvest and recreation). Chris explained that two seniors at Unity College have created a High Peaks Recreation Plan that tries to accommodate a variety of uses and depends on voluntary permissions from landowners.

The Alliance is currently made up of a core group of 10 people with signatures from an additional 50 citizens supporting the vision. They are working their way through the

towns and recruiting selectmen. The group needs help communicating their vision to more residents and visitors through general outreach, invitations to meetings, support letters and conversations about local collaboration.

**High Peaks Forest Legacy project presentation.** The High Peaks Initiative of the Maine Appalachian Trail Land Trust is working to build a larger land base of conserved lands through a public and private partnership. The High Peaks Initiative intends to conserve land in vicinity of the Appalachian Trail for multiple motorized and non-motorized uses while continuing its tradition as a working forest with sensitivity towards special ecological areas. The funding is a combination of private, individual donations and foundations.

The High Peaks Initiative's Forest Legacy Project resulted from a meeting with county commissioners that was covered heavily by the press and came to the governor's attention. MATLT was invited by the state to submit a Forest Legacy application. If approved, this federally financed grant would provide money to support the working forest through conservation easements that guarantee public access. There is no plan for the National Park Service to expand their area along the Appalachian Trail. Marc explained that the NPS mandate is to provide parks and land for use by the American people and that legislation dictates what the uses are. The current partners on the High Peaks Initiative Forest Legacy Project are three major timber operators and the Maine Bureau of Parks and Lands.

**Wild Brook Trout Initiative presentation.** Forrest Bonney from Maine IF&W spoke about the Wild Brook Trout Initiative. He feels that the wild brook trout resource in the backcountry ponds is underutilized and under marketed when it could be used to attract anglers to Franklin County. Out of the 32,000 miles of streams in Maine, approximately 25,000 have brook trout. Most anglers who visit the state are not interested in harvesting, most practice catch and release. A majority of these remote ponds in Franklin County are publicly accessible with current permissions from landowners with a few controlled by fishing clubs.

Marc had heard from several guides that expanding fly-fishing only to some of these ponds would help their business. Forrest responded that the mortality from spin bait versus fly-fishing is the same, using live bait has the biggest impact on mortality rates. Forrest explained that the average size of the fish has actually decreased because of restrictions launched in 1990; these regulations have caused an increase in fish populations which can cause more parasites and competition over resources.

IF&W needs a mechanism to let people know what is available for marketing. A majority of these ponds require a hike in, allowing for an isolationist experience with beautiful scenery and abundant wildlife. It would be ideal to bring together lodging, guides, and the licenses into a package. Working with Maine Huts and Trails could also have a great benefit. The Chambers and the Maine Lakes and Mountains Tourism Council would like to gather more information from Forrest to include in their guidebooks and websites.

Marc would like to talk further with Forrest to see how they can incorporate his work with local guides.

**Cooperative Extension Customer Survey presentation.** Marc presented on the Franklin County Visitor Survey results. This presentation is on the Franklin County Tourism Network workgroup page at [www.mainewoodsconsortium.org](http://www.mainewoodsconsortium.org). Marc learned a lot from this process and felt that he could improve the design for next year to increase reliability. He plans on going through and separating out specific businesses, parsing out individual characteristics and doing additional number crunching to see what other trends emerge. There will be community based meetings next year to roll out this data. He would like to start again in the spring with a wider net to capture data beyond just nature based tourism. Also, Marc is very interested in looking at marketing beyond websites through social networking sites and podcasts. He may run tests with small businesses to determine how effective marketing through these outlets can be.

**Tourism Training presentation.** The Training Program conversation began with summaries of the workshops offered this fall. Betty reported that the Customer Service Training in Rangeley was a success with 60 attendees and a wait list. She felt they could have charged an additional \$5 and still had the same attendance. Feedback received centered around the short amount of time to teach the subject with requests for more hands on examples and delving into specific scenarios. Overall feedback was very positive and Betty has the contact information for businesses for future follow-up.

Dina reported on the Tourism Marketing Workshop that she facilitated with Greg Gould. Turnout was a little disappointing, 14 people signed up but only 10 attended. The group was heavy on the lodging side and very engaged with the topic. Dina and Greg emphasized the need for businesses to differentiate themselves in the market. Many businesses said they were going to go back and rework their current marketing plans or write one. There was expressed need for help creating ads since few can afford an agency. This could lead to future workshops on brochure design, website improvement, and marketing strategies.

Bruce gave a quick update on the Maine Woods Training Program. Both the Franklin County Tourism Network and the Maine Woods RDT group have shown great interest in training. The question then becomes how to structure an ongoing training program to address employee and business needs. There are opportunities already available through the community college system, UMaine system, private consultants, and non-profits. How can these be tied together to meet the need? The Betterment Fund has given \$15,000 to support the development of a training program. Funding still needs to be found for implementation. The hope is that this will be woven into a statewide system of handling training and business support.

Carolann Ouellette at MOT had suggested looking at ways to send employees to training opportunities outside Maine. Marc and Chris wondered if there was a way to offer scholarships so business leaders could go the National Association of Interpretation

conference next year in Hartford.

**Communications platform for this network.** The final conversation centered on the need for a communications platform for FCTN. The primary questions are: how to inform businesses about upcoming workshops, promote collaboration between businesses, educate about shared marketing opportunities and offer a way to share successes. Lorna suggested using the weekly bulletin that reaches over 800 through a collaboration of the 3 chambers. She also suggested using press releases in local papers. Marc volunteered to write an op-ed for the local papers talking about what is going on with tourism in Franklin County. Dina suggested asking the businesses directly how they get their information perhaps through a survey monkey.

This conversation brought up concerns about duplication of efforts. An additional conversation in January and a meeting with interested parties will address this issue.