

Plum Creek looks to Bangor for project supporters

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BANGOR — With a final round of public hearings looming on the near horizon, planners of the massive Plum Creek development and conservation project near Moosehead Lake are looking for committed supporters.

The Plum Creek proposal has sparked intense statewide debate over how to promote job growth in the economically distressed region without ruining the natural beauty that has made Moosehead one of Maine's most beloved destinations.

At an invitation-only dinner meeting in Bangor Tuesday evening, project manager and Greenville native Luke Muzzy asked about 35 area business leaders to sign up to speak in favor of the plan at the public hearings before the seven-member Land Use Regulatory Commission in December.

"If this doesn't get approved," Muzzy told his audience of business-suited professionals in one of the Sea Dog restaurant's conference rooms, "we'll develop the area the old-fashioned way." Plum Creek, he said, would be forced to abandon the complex planning that's gone on for the past three years and proceed on a parcel-by-parcel basis over the more than 408,000 acres of timberland and lake-front property the company owns. It would be "haphazard, unplanned, unpredictable growth," Muzzy said, in contrast to the responsive plan that has evolved out of many months of meetings and negotiations.

The current plan includes protecting more than 400,000 acres in permanent conservation and public access easements, while developing two resort areas and 975 residential lots in and around Greenville, Jackman and Rockwood. It also incorporates the construction of affordable housing units for some of the workers that will fill the more than 600 jobs the project promises to bring to the area.

Some environmental groups have accused Seattle-based Plum Creek, the nation's largest landowner, of attempting to reap enormous profits from land it bought for timber production without regard for wildlife and the local nature-based tourism industry.

On Tuesday, in his shirt

sleeves and khakis, Muzzy told the dinner guests that the scope of the project has been hard for some people to "get their arms around." But with school enrollments plummeting, the local hospital barely keeping its doors open and the general population dwindling as the traditional forest-based economy shuts down, the area is in dire need of a long-term economic development vision, he said.

"We've got to do something," he said. "We can't go on the way we've been going for the past 20 or 30 years."

Donna Fichtner from the Coalition to Preserve and Grow Northern Maine also addressed the business group. Bangor functions as the "service center" for all of northern Maine, she said, and local businesses should be acutely interested in the fortunes of surrounding communities.

"It's important for you to recognize that as rural Maine loses the ability to sustain its economy, Bangor loses as well," she said. And if the Plum Creek project is successful, she said, "Bangor will be successful as well."

"We need people to stand up [at the public hearings] and say 'This project is good for northern Maine,'" Fichtner said.

During a question and comment period after the presentation, audience members expressed their support of the plan. Bangor attorney Andy Hamilton warned that "opponents will be very vocal" at the coming hearings and commended Plum Creek on its efforts to educate people in northern and central Maine about the benefits of the development.

Scott Fish, editor and publisher of the conservative "As Maine Goes" Web site, said, "It infuriates me that a private landowner would have to surrender this much land" to satisfy the demands of conservationists. Muzzy concurred that Plum Creek was paying "a steep price" by selling development rights.

"But if this didn't make sense for the company, we wouldn't be doing it," he said.

Others at the meeting discussed the possibility of organizing a show of support for Plum Creek at the public hearings, and many filled out and submitted preprinted cards indicating their willingness to present testimony.

Public hearings are expected to be held in December.