

North Country Symposium focuses on entrepreneurship

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Business owners, local government officials and representatives from the area colleges convened at St. Lawrence University's Eben Holden Conference Center for the 15th annual North Country Symposium on Monday morning.

CANTON — Dozens of business owners, local government officials and representatives from area colleges gathered at St. Lawrence University's Eben Holden Conference Center to collaborate on how to prop up the north country's economic development efforts.

This is the second straight year the North Country Symposium has focused on entrepreneurship.

“The response has been so dramatic that we felt like we better keep going,” said James Shuman, chairman of the symposium’s steering committee.

Instead of focusing on individual entrepreneurship, however, the 2017 symposium was broken into sectors to allow stakeholders in different industries to brainstorm ways to help bolster different topics as a whole. The four sectors — energy, agriculture, tourism and arts — gave attendees a more direct link to those who will be helpful to them within a specific industry.

Deborah Markley, co-founder and managing director of the Center for Rural Entrepreneurship, a national nonprofit organization, addressed the crowd for the second year and spoke in depth about the goals of this year’s symposium.

Ms. Markley said for the past eight years, she has been part of a group that has been working to do economic development in a way that builds wealth in rural places and makes sure that wealth stays local.

“This year we are going to dig into sectors,” Ms. Markley said. “You all, as people who love this region and the north country as a whole, really have a lot of knowledge about this place and the assets in this place and we want to pull that out over the course of today.”

Sharing knowledge was one of the reasons business owner Katie Wilson said she elected to attend the daylong symposium.

Ms. Wilson, of Keene, owns Adirondack Attic, an antique and consignment shop. While she was interested in the overall business focus of this year’s symposium, she was also eager to network with the agricultural leaders and offer up some of her ideas.

“I am really interested in connecting our small farms to our institutions; our schools, our prisons, our hospitals,” she said. “I want to hear what the farmers and the other people connected to that sector have to say about that idea, about connecting our institutions to our farms and connecting our farms to our institutions. What would it be like to have local food in our hospitals and our prisons, not just our schools? I have a lot of ideas, so I want to see how those are received and see what other people are thinking about in that sector.”

Ms. Wilson’s ideas are centered on using resources in the area to satisfy regional demand, and the use of pre-existing resources is something Ms. Markley said would be key for developing economic strategies for the north country.

Ms. Markley introduced WealthWorks, an approach to economic development that starts with the resources a given area has, connects those assets to demand in a way that builds livelihoods for people in that region and ensures that wealth sticks over time.

“It is, at its core, asset-based development,” she said. “What is really interesting from my perspective is that the value chain tool is a way to bring a lot of people together within a sector but who cross boundaries. People who are in the public sector, people who are in philanthropy, people who are agricultural producers with people who are in agricultural market chains, it

brings a very wide and broad range of folks together around the table who all come because they have some individual interest in it.”

“There is both this focus on local demand ... but also, why can’t north country farmers sell into more urban markets? Why can’t we be thinking about this work at scale and think about regionally or even statewide as opposed to just inside local economy?” she said.

While Ms. Wilson’s efforts Monday were focused on agriculture and, as Ms. Markley suggested, selling them regionally, she also said she was intrigued by the business atmosphere of the area as a whole.

“I am really invested in our local economy both for personal reasons and for the health of our region. I think that what is good for my business is good for everyone else around here and vice versa,” she said.