

2013

Large crowd at community forest meeting

On Saturday, June 16 of last year, the front-page headline in the provincial newspaper announced BLACK DAY AT BOWATER MERSEY, bringing the news that the county's largest employer was closing.

The lead sentence in the newspaper said that "harvesting of trees for the paper mill in Queens County ceased Friday night, the papermaking machines are expected to stop running at noon today, and 320 employees and their families are wondering how they're going to pay the bills."

No matter what the workers did to make the plant successful, and no matter what the province did to enable it to stay open, owners in Quebec decided to close it. Gloom spread over Queens County and indeed over Lunenburg County too, as the big Oakhill sawmill was a part of the Resolute empire, which had swallowed up Bowater.

Since then, the people of Queens County have surprised everyone with their optimism

Resources and municipal representatives from the Region of Queens and the Municipality of Annapolis.

One of the first speakers was Mary Keirstead, from the North Queens Board of Trade, who just returned from a national community forest conference in Sault Ste. Marie, which she had attended with Jane Barker, forest stewardship coordinator at MTRI. Mary said that Nova Scotia was front and centre at the conference, with all delegates excited about the fact that Nova Scotia was establishing community forests.

Next was Dan Eidt, a senior representative of the Department of Natural Resources. Eidt is director of resource management for DNR, and is responsible for crown lands in the province. He told the meeting that he had known about community forests for twenty or more years, and that fifteen years ago in British Columbia he had been talking with the government about community forests. He said com-



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they didn't act like they had been beaten into the ground. It is true that some left to work for the time being in the west, but those that stayed were prepared to see what the new economic world brought. People were ready to fight to survive.

That spirit was evident in Caledonia on Monday night, when one of the largest public meetings in recent years saw standing room only at the Masonic Hall, as people listened to proposals about a community forest and saw visions of the future.

The New Democratic government of Premier Darrell Dexter bought the huge forest holdings of Bowater for the people of Nova Scotia, having no intention of turning these tracts of wilderness over to a scenario where our trees could be cut, shipped away and ground into chips by a distant multinational. It was a bold, risky move, and from what I've heard, the people of southwestern Nova Scotia appreciate it.

The meeting was run by the North Queens Board of Trade and the Mersey Tobeatic Research Institute, which has taken the lead in developing a proposal to establish a community forest on some of the lands. I wrote about community forests recently. They work elsewhere, but would they work here? Could a committee, or board, effectively handle all of the economic facets of forest management? The answer seemed to be a strong yes.

Present at the meeting were residents, woodlot owners, sawmill owners, tree harvesters and loggers, people from recreation, hiking and canoe groups, business people, representatives of the Department of Natural

been recognized as important for a number of years, as a way of getting more involvement in the way crown lands are managed.

The minister still had responsibility for public lands, Eidt said, but the process was opening up and allowing communities to be more involved in the decision-making process. There were certain things the government would not be flexible on - nature reserves and parks were given as examples - but the working forest should involve the community more. Eidt said that community forests were an interesting challenge and a great opportunity.

The shape that community forests will take will be determined over time, as the government and communities discuss proposals. A number of people took the floor to explain issues and discuss questions, including Will Martin, who is a director of Windhorse Woods in Lunenburg County; Tom Berry, a forestry technician from Annapolis; and Alastair Jarvis, Lunenburg, a woodlot owner and private businessman. Also speaking was MTRI's Alain Beliveau, ecosystem researcher at MTRI, who has been developing maps for the proposed community forest.

A variety of interesting issues were raised from the floor, including the question of roads and their maintenance in the proposed forests, and how to manage the gates to the woodlands. These questions will be debated over the next several weeks, as the process to establish the Medway Community Forest Cooperative gains momentum. Even now, MTRI is analyzing the results of a public opinion survey sent to homes in the areas involved.