

Reach out to prosper, region told

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CORNING -- Shifting the focus of economic development from local communities to a 12- or 13-county region is necessary for the long-term vitality of the Southern Tier.

That was the message of Wednesday's Regional Action Initiative at the Corning Museum of Glass sponsored by Pipeline 4 Progress.

The event brought together representatives of business, industry, higher education and other organizations to launch a regional planning initiative.

"Individual counties are doing OK but don't have enough assets to be sustainable in the long term," said Jack Benjamin, president of Three Rivers Development Corp. in Corning.

"We need to bring in (institutions like) Cornell University, Ithaca College and SUNY Binghamton to partner with the private sector so we have something we can really promote."

Ron Seeber, vice provost for land grant affairs at Cornell University, said Cornell believes its ability to attract faculty and students is tied to the vitality of the region's economy.

Some 600 to 700 members of the Cornell faculty are approaching retirement.

"It's not useful to us to be an island of success if we are not helping solve the problems of the region," Seeber said.

"We want to help build a collaboration that says we must work regionally. Local cities and towns cannot do it by themselves."

Consolidation of local governments or local government services is a key to restraining the high property taxes that hurt the region's competitiveness, said Stanley N. Lundine, a former Southern Tier congressman and lieutenant governor.

Lundine chairs Gov. Eliot Spitzer's New York State Commission on Local Government Efficiency and Competitiveness, which is scheduled to make its recommendations April 15.

"We have too much government and too many school districts," Lundine said. "We need a hammer as well as incentives.

"We need to cut down the spigot on the local level to people who are not willing to consolidate."

Lynn Dates of the Arts of the Southern Finger Lakes was among those who attended the conference.

"This seems like a really good next step," she said. "I can see how what we (the Arts) do fit into this."

Former U.S. Rep. Amo Houghton kicked off the event.

"I believe in this area," Houghton said. "We have so much to work with, but we need leadership. The question is whether we can make the transition to have a really exciting area."

Pipeline 4 Progress is an organization aimed at attracting young professionals to the area and involving them in community affairs. The group's director, Mike Fuller, presided at Wednesday's event.

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Former U.S. Rep. Amo Houghton opened Wednesday's Regional Action Initiative on a positive note. "I believe in this area," he said. "We have so much to work with, but we need leadership."



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Former New York Lt. Gov. Stan Lundine said Wednesday that consolidation of government services must be a priority. "We have too much government and too many school districts," he said.