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PROGRESS 1985

St. Lawrence County

Despite Mill Closings, Region Forges Ahead To Provide New Jobs For Citizens

BY MICHAEL HIRSCH

CANTON — Industry in St. Lawrence County made some strides in 1985, but also took a couple of steps backwards with the closing of paper plants in Odgensburg and Norfolk, according to the director of the county's Economic Development Office.

"Quite obviously the biggest loss was when the two paper plants closed down," said Director Edmund Russell.

"The plants represent substantial resources that the people in Ogdensburg and Norfolk don't want to see go by the boards."

The two plants closed their doors because of poor conditions in the international paper market, he said.

The Ponderosa paper mill in Ogdensburg, which employed more than 40 workers, shut down last May. The Bank of New York recently took possession of the plant after Ponderosa Fibers chose not to buy the plant because of depressed market conditions.

The Norfolk paper mill, the former Simplicity Paper Plant, closed last February. The shutdown put 51 employees out of work. The county has received offers on the Norfolk plant, but the owners have not made a decision whether to accept the proposal or not.

"The most troubling aspect about the closings is that it is so difficult to get people to locate here, that you don't want to lose anything you already have," Russell said.

"I'm hopeful this year will represent an improvement over last year."

The head of the county's Economic Development office said he also had high hopes for the Ultrapower project in Gouverneur that is now on hold. Plans called for burning waste wood to generate electricity.

The $40 million plus project would have employed about 20 workers in Gouverneur and about 50 workers in the forest. But Russell said he is "not wholly optimistic" that the proposal will become a reality.

On the positive side of last year's economic picture, Russell said his office has helped two companies locate in the Massena Industrial Park.

River Road Coffee, which roasts coffee and employs four workers and recently announced plans for expansion in the industrial park.

Dynamic Enclosures, which builds sliding doors used in open shopping malls and elsewhere, has located in Massena. The company now employs three and hopes to eventually employ eight or nine workers.

The Economic Development office has helped Capulum locate in Commerce Park in Ogdensburg. The company manufactures cable connections for electronic equipment. Currently employing two workers, the company hopes to expand and employ ten to 12 workers.

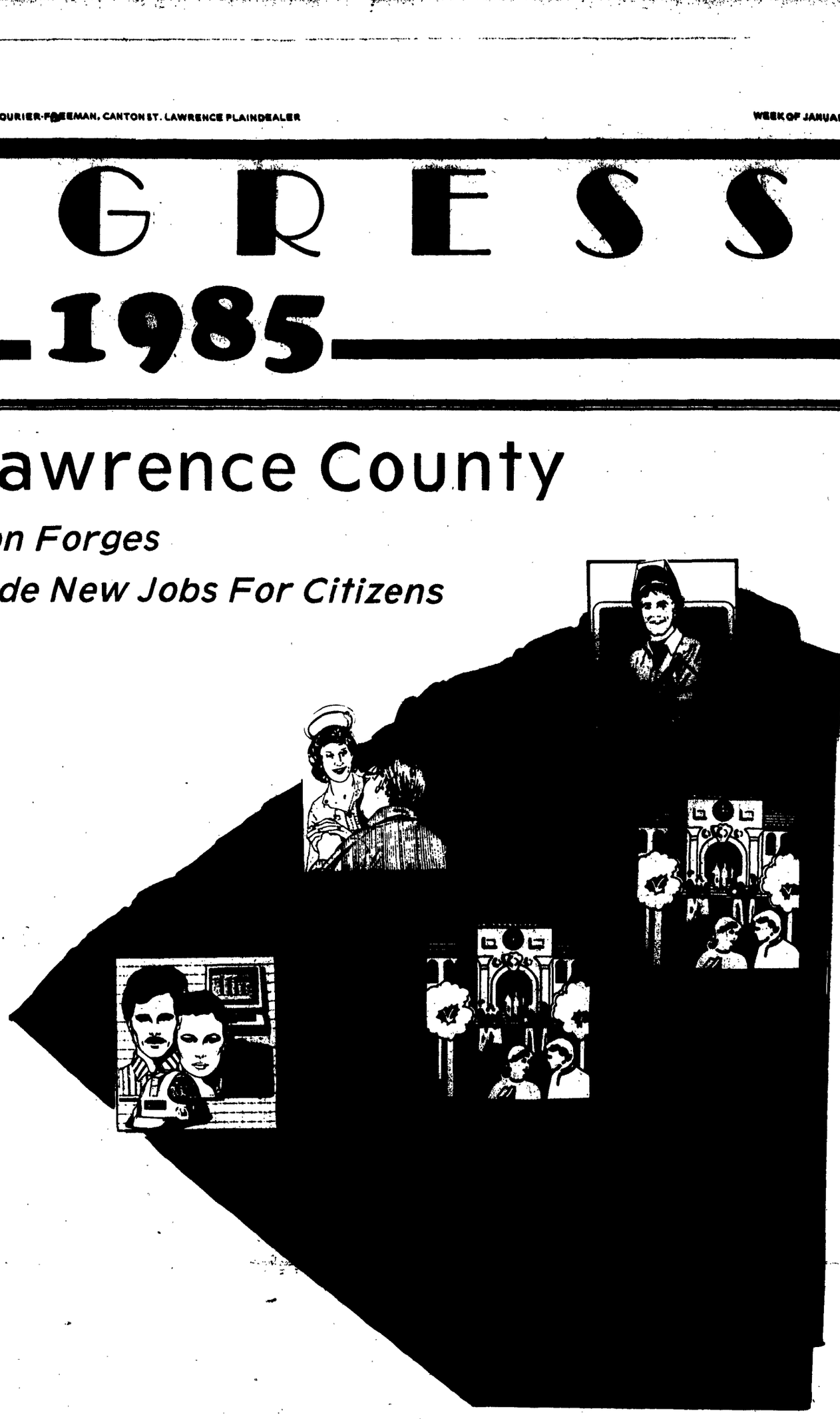
Russell said his office has also sold off about 85 percent of the Potsdam Industrial Park. The county decided to "condominiumize" the park by selling off portions.

The county has also funded two projects through a Community Development Block Grant it received two years ago. Atlantic Testing Labs in Potsdam expanded its office building with a loan of $150,000 of grant money and American Computer Assembly in Ogdensburg purchased new equipment with a $35,000 loan.

The St. Lawrence County Industrial Development Agency assisted Clarkson Inn Associates in building a new hotel in Potsdam by making revenue bond financing available.

The county IDA also helped refinance an old bond issue of $8.5 billion for Reynolds Metals in Massena. "The bond strengthened Reynolds' position in the marketplace," Russell said.

The county also helped Pyrites Associates get a $9 million bond issue for the rehabilitation and construction of a hydroelectric dam site in the town of Canton, he said.



Prison Needed In Southern County?

Depressed Southern End Of County Seeks New Jobs

BY MICHAEL HIRSCH

STAR LAKE — The new chairman of the county legislature's Economic Development Committee said he hopes towns in the southern end of the county can get an economic boost from new industries or perhaps a prison.

Robert Snider (R-Fine and Clifton) said he did not take the chairmanship of the committee simply to help towns in southern St. Lawrence County.

But living and owning a business in the area, he said he knows that these towns need all the help they can get.

"I know what can happen when a community loses a major business," Snider said.

"I am fully aware of the great importance industries have to an area — whether you are talking about churches, stores or whatever."

J & L Steel, which had mined ore in Star Lake, closed its doors several years ago when growing foreign competition and falling steel prices made the business unprofitable.

The shutdown to one of the region's largest employers put hundreds out of work and left few options for other jobs in the area.

"The southern end of the county has been in a tough spot the last few years," Snider said.

Since the shutdown, the southern end of the county has never recovered. The timber industry and paper industry, also in the midst of hard times, and tourism remain the only major sources of employment for the region.

"This area is probably in worse shape than the rest of the county. The southern end definitely needs help. Hopefully we can bring something here.

"I'm not going into this position specifically for helping the southern area. I will be looking at the county as a whole. Anything we can bring into St. Lawrence County will benefit everyone in the long run."

Snider said he would like to try to get another prison located in the county.

"I brought the question up to Ed Russell (director of the county's Economic Development Office) and he said he would look into it," the legislator said.

"This is something I would like to get rolling up here. It's nothing official, but we are looking into it."

A prison is something that would "definitely" help towns in the southern end of St. Lawrence County, Snider said.

"At one time prisons were a naughty word to communities," he said. "Now everyone wants one. People saw the amount of business they generate in a community and saw that they cause relatively few problems."

For attracting industries to the county, Snider said he realizes the area has a "lot of strikes against it."

"We are very isolated up here," he said. "We have no four lane highways, no major waterways.

"But there has got to be people somewhere who would love to come up in the North Country to enjoy our recreational facilities and all that we have and hopefully set up businesses."

St. Lawrence County Chamber of Commerce Executive Director Byron Gale has said the county needs to emphasize its tourism efforts.

He describes the Cranberry Lake and Star Lake areas in the Adirondacks as prime areas where tourism could generate new jobs and development for the area.

Gale says if the county could help businesses in that area obtain venture capital, the region could upgrade its hotels and motels to attract winter cross country skiers and others to enjoy the natural beauties of the area.

Currently, the area's tourism peaks at the end of hunting season, slowing down until spring arrives.

County officials have worked at attracting business to the now vacant J&L Steel plant. The plant and facilities are included in the county's regional marketing brochures. The county hopes that efforts to market magnetite from the talings piles, as well as efforts to reduce Newton Falls paper mill's transportation costs by using the Ogdensburg port will strengthen the region's economy.

Private Industry Council Offers Help To Unemployed

BY MICHAEL HIRSCH

CANTON — The St. Lawrence County Private Industry Council helps not only low and moderate income people get training and often jobs, but it serves small businesses in the county too, according to the council's chairman.

"This is a real resource to many small employers who need incentives to cut the costs of training," said Gary VanKennen, chairman of PIC.

"The program really works hand-in-hand with private business. It serves low income people and also provides economic development for small businesses."

The Private Industry Council, which administers money from the federal Job Training Partnership Act, generally pays about half of a worker's salary during his training period. The average training period is about 18 weeks.

"We are a group of private business people and public sector people who work towards promoting jobs for those with low and moderate incomes," VanKennen said.

"We try to bridge between the private sector employer who has a need and low income people who need training and jobs. And we do it very successfully I might add. We bridge with a subsidy of the nature of on the job training."

The program has been successful putting a high percentage of those in the program into unsubsidized jobs, according to Edmund Russell, director of the county's Office of Economic Development.

In the last program year, which runs from July 1 to June 30, the Private Industry Council provided training to 351 people in its main "78 Percent Program."

"Of those 351, 250 completed the program by June 30," Russell said. "Of those 250, 175 entered unsubsidized employment. And that's really the goal we have.

"For adults we had an 84 percent employment rate, which is excellent. The rate for those under 22 was 57 percent, compared to the standard in the state of about 40 percent.

"We served a number of economically disadvantaged residents and placed a large number in employment."

The council also administers a youth "try-out" program, VanKennen said.

"If an employer trains a young person in the program for 250 hours at 20 hours per week, we will pay the whole cost," he said. "We want to teach good job skills to our younger people who want to enter the job market."

For the first time last year, the Private Industry Council also ran a program in conjunction with the county's Social Services Department.

"We are trying to provide those on social services with training and get them out in the labor force," Russell said.

"Of the 193 on social services we served last year, 86 were placed in unsubsidized employment. This obviously reduces the cost to the county for social services bills."