

## How Do You Revitalize Rural Areas?



**RENSELAER FALLS DAM** — The dam here once provided power to a grist mill and two saw mills. But today, Rensselaer Falls has fewer residents than it had in 1862. (Mitchell Photo)

### Planners Hope To Help County's Small Towns, Hamlets, Crossroads

**BY MICHAEL HIRSCH**  
**RENSELAER FALLS** — In the 1890's, this village situated in the north-west corner of the town of Canton was a bustling community boasting 14 stores, a train station, the three-story Central House hotel, a cheese factory and several other shops and factories.  
 The Oswegatchie River, which falls six feet as it passes through the village named after early settler, once powered a grist mill and two saw mills.  
 Today, many of the stores are vacant. The hotel long ago went up in flames. Trains no longer pass through the village — the tracks were recently torn up and the station has been removed. The population of 360 is actually less than the 400 people who lived in the village in 1862.

Rensselaer Falls is typical of many of the small villages and hamlets in St. Lawrence County that have been on the decline since the small mills or mines or paper plants that provided jobs were shut down.  
 "The social structure in rural areas has changed entirely from a situation where you had small cheese factories all over that made possible small dairy farms," said Mark Scarlett, a member of the St. Lawrence County Planning Board.  
 "The small mills and mines are gone. Sometimes you come to a crossroads where there once was a community and you wonder what there ever was to sustain it. You talk to some of the older residents and it's amazing to find it was once a bustling area."  
 Scarlett, chairman of the planning board's Regional Development and Recreation Committee, hopes that some of these small communities can begin to head out on

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the road to recovery. He has asked the planning staff to provide local officials with a roadmap listing possible routes for revitalization.  
 Using two national award-winning studies of Adirondack hamlets as a guide, Scarlett said he would like the planning board to extend its findings and recommendations in those studies to small communities in St. Lawrence County that are outside of the Blue Line.  
 The first step in the process will be identifying several hamlets or villages that could serve as model projects and "that have a good chance for success," he said. An initial list of possible sites in St. Lawrence County contained the names of 86 communities, ranging from large villages to crossroads areas encompassing only a handful of buildings.  
 "To begin trying to narrow the list down, we decided to look only at

communities with populations of less than 2,000 and with at least one year-round retail establishment," Scarlett said.  
 "We figured that with over 2,000 people, a community probably has the resources to do the work itself. And you have got to have a minimum of resources, on the other hand, to do something viable to revitalize."  
 The chairman of the planning board committee said the new study will look at "examples representative of different kinds of hamlets; maybe there is the potential for tourism in one, agriculture in another, and business development in a third."  
 "One of the crucial elements in all of this is there has to be people in the communities that want to do this," he said. "I think the people

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## Tough Competitors

### When Jobs At Stake, Communities Will Raid Each Other

**BY MICHAEL HIRSCH**  
**CANTON** — When officials with the Watertown manufacturer Car Freshner expressed an interest in moving to St. Lawrence County, they were approached separately by economic development officials from Canton, Gouverneur, Ogdensburg and Massena.

The competition between the seven active local development groups in St. Lawrence County can often be fierce, economic developers admit, with each agency trying to bring jobs and tax dollars to its own community.

But Edmund Russell, director of the county's Office of Economic Development, said that that competition can be healthy.

"I don't think there is any doubt that there is competition between the different agencies," Russell said. "But I don't think it is necessarily bad."

"It is an indication of concern that local officials have about their employment base and their tax base. I see nothing wrong with it. It is a sign of concern and intelligence."

"I know the argument is that if one community gets an industry, they all benefit. But obviously more benefits go to the community that gets it. They (local officials) understandably want the benefits that accrue and they want to get their foot in the door."

In addition to Russell's office, other agencies trying to attract new businesses to St. Lawrence County are: Canton Development



**EDMUND L. RUSSELL**

Corp., Gouverneur Area Development Corp., Massena Industrial Development Agency, Northern Advanced Technology Corp. (in Potsdam), the Ogdensburg Bridge and Port Authority and the city of Ogdensburg.

The county's economic developer said he encourages local agencies to "move into areas I basically can't serve, such as specialized development."

He pointed to the Northern Advanced Technology Corp. (NATCo) as a good example of an agency concentrating on specialized development. A consortium of colleges and local and county officials,

NATCo is seeking to lure businesses to a new high tech/industrial park being built at the State University College at Potsdam.

"One of the other things my office can't do is help commercial and downtown businesses that want to expand," Russell said. "I just don't have the staff to do it. Essentially, my office is looking at industrial development projects."

Although he believes the competition between communities for new jobs can be healthy, Russell said he thinks the agencies should try to work closer to eliminate "duplication of efforts."

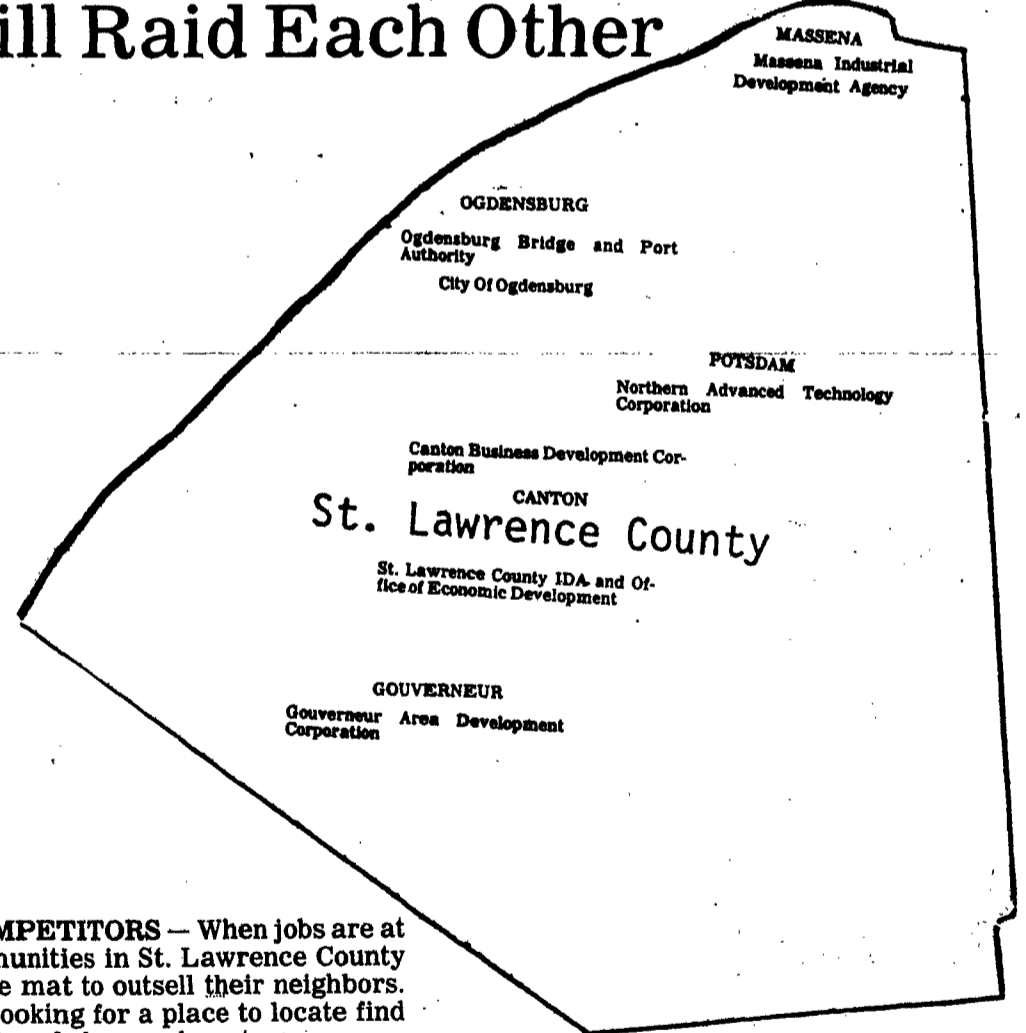
"I think there is room for various development corporations," he said. "But I think it behooves us to try to eliminate duplication of services."

"I may be looking out for my own selfish interests, but I think it makes more sense to do marketing and advertising out of the county than it does on the local level. You get less wasted funds if you have one outfit doing it."

"But I don't really have the answer to solving that. Everyone wants to control his own destiny and I don't think we are going to reach the point where every community is going to agree to let the county do it. I think all the communities want to do their own marketing."

"I think the money could be better spent in different ways, but it's not my business to tell them how to spend their money."

**TOUGH COMPETITORS** — When jobs are at stake, communities in St. Lawrence County will go to the mat to outsell their neighbors. Businesses looking for a place to locate find they can pick and choose where to go.



## Small Towns Businesses Band Together For Growth, Tourism



**WADDINGTON** — Waddington businesspeople have banded together to bring back the Bluewater Regatta, boost their commercial area, and tourism.

**BY TERRY KOCH**  
 Mention the words "Chamber of Commerce," and chances are St. Lawrence County's "Big Five" communities — Ogdensburg, Gouverneur, Potsdam, Canton, and Massena — will spring to mind.

But chambers of commerce aren't just for the bigger communities.

There's also a growing interest in the chamber of commerce concept by the smaller villages, which are beginning to form chambers for a wide variety of reasons.

Byron Gale, executive director of the St. Lawrence County Chamber of Commerce, says there's a "definite" upsurge in interest by small village residents in starting up or re-starting lapsed chambers.

Gale credits new matching funds from the New York State Department of Commerce.

Those matching funds in turn have encouraged the county Chamber of Commerce to get involved in helping the small com-

munities to set up their chambers. "There's no direct relationship between the county and the local chambers," he stressed. "They're two separate and distinct functions."

"But because matching funds are available," he added, "people in our office are willing to go to the local communities. This helps them get a kind of professional critique that they might not get otherwise."

The county chamber will also help the town or village establish an advertising campaign, get ideas going, and assist them in participating in the St. Lawrence County Chamber of Commerce advertising effort.

Creating a local chamber, he said, allows communities to "achieve local recognition."

It also presents the communities with an alternative to seeking local government funds to raise the necessary liability insurance for local events.

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**BLACK LAKE** — The Edwardsville and surrounding area has had a Chamber of Commerce for years. Its members promote fishing and camping in the Black Lake area.