

# Groveton Community Forum Ends On An Optimistic Note

BY SALLY ANDERSON COOK

Staff Writer

GROVETON, N.H. — A public forum Saturday began with tears, but ended with cautious optimism for the future.

More than 100 people gathered for the meeting called to address issues for employees and the region in the wake of the pending Wausau Paper Mill closure Dec. 31.

"I feel like I'm coming to a funeral, but I don't feel like it has to be this way," said John Robarge choking back tears. "My father and mother worked there for many years. I was raised on the mill. That's all we know."

Robarge blamed mill closures on a sell out by government and business to overseas manufacturing that pays pennies per hour for labor. He said international trade policies should be changed or "things are going to get worse."

Union treasurer Brian Bresnahan described the shock that hit employees when the announcement was made, and "you could have seen the jaws hit the floor."

Since then, Bresnahan said the steel workers' union was very active in letting other Wausau mill workers know what was happening, resulting in picketing at all Wausau plants.

They also contacted U.S. Rep. Paul



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*Groveton resident Edna Langlois tells the audience at the Wausau Paper Mill community forum that, "They say Florida is Paradise, but Groveton is really paradise," in her support for the community members to pursue their ideas for creating campgrounds or historic attractions.*

Hodes, D-N.H., U.S. Sen. John Sununu, R-N.H., and U.S. Sen. Bernie Sanders, I-Vt., to get them to write letters urging Wausau Paper to up the "pathetic package they offered," when it came to severance pay and health benefits.

Bresnahan was one of several third-generation paper mill employees who spoke Saturday of the impact closure of Wausau Paper Mill will have on their families and the community.

The tone of the meeting began to change when Berlin's economic director, Norman Chavest spoke. He too was a third-generation paper mill employee, whose grandfather had come to Berlin from Quebec to work in the paper mill, and his father worked there all his life.

"I want to bring some sunshine to a pretty gloomy meeting," Chavest said. "We in

Berlin went through this more than once."

He said the Berlin paper mill was sold to owners from Virginia to California, before it was closed for good.

"We've been at this for two or three years, and I don't think we're done yet," Chavest said. "But, we're way ahead of Groveton."

He described progress that had been made so far toward generating potential jobs that might help Wausau Paper Mill employees.

"Due to the hard work of state and local officials, Berlin is going to get a federal prison, the third largest in the country," Chavest said. "In the next three years, there will be 300 to 500 construction jobs."

There was skepticism about exactly how many people locally would be hired with See **Groveton Forum**, Page 20

## Wausau Paper Mill Executive Responds To Union's Claims

BY AMY ASH NIXON

Staff Writer

GROVETON, N.H. — The spokesman for the Wausau Paper company responded on Friday to comments made Thursday by representatives from Local 61 of the United Steelworkers' Union.

In a press conference staged in the union hall, union officials lambasted the company's offer to the 303 displaced workers, calling the severance package "pathetic."

Company spokesman Stu Carlson, speaking from the company's headquarters in Wisconsin, said the decision to have to close the Groveton, N.H., plant was not made lightly, and the company grappled with the closure decision. But ultimately, the fact that Groveton was no longer profitable decided the mill's fate.

Carlson said that Wausau has owned the mill since 1993, and that while some workers at the mill have as long a tenure as 40 years, Wausau has only been the longtime mill's owner for 14 years.

He said the severance offer — from four to 12 weeks depending on years of service — with medical and other benefits matching the number of weeks, is the company's final — and best — offer, despite the union's pleas for more consideration and, as Union President Murray Rogers urged on Thursday, decency toward the workers facing a bleak future after the holidays.

"It was a very hard decision," Carlson said. "They are a very good work force, and they are very good people."

He was at the Wausau mill in Groveton about two weeks ago when the decision to close the mill — the town's main and longest employer — was announced. That announcement has led to anxiousness in the community, as officials look at the town and school budgets with trepidation now, and homeowners are vocal about the fact that they are essentially trapped — fearing that few people will look to buy a home in the town with this devastating economic news looming.

Carlson said the issues that led to the decision to cease operations at the Wausau mill in Groveton have absolutely nothing to do with the efforts of the local work force. The costs of fuel and oil, the costs of the raw material, where the end consumers are, the trends in usage of certain grades of paper made by the company and global competition, all were cited as what contributed to the death knell.

The decision to close the mill is final — there is no possibility of the decision being reversed, as Ron Pickering, the sub district director of the United Steelworkers for Maine, New Hampshire and Vermont, urged at last week's press conference.

Pickering, Rogers and about three dozen workers pleaded for the mill to be saved — and for people to find a way to keep the proud old paper mill humming. But for now, the eerie reality of the closure seems irreversible.

Carlson said that the issues that led to See **Wausau Responds**, Page 20

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## Groveton Forum

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estimates offered that ranged from 30 percent to 75 percent.

"Even 30 percent is better than no jobs. Don't turn a blind eye to opportunity. Berlin's not that far, and it could buy you some time," Chavest said, suggesting that communities in the region need to band together.

In addition to the federal prison, he said other opportunities in Berlin may be coming soon, mentioning a wood pellet plant, a biomass plant and an ATV Park.

"I've been in the trenches for six or seven years and been involved in economic development in Coos County," Chavest said. "We need to become a destination like Cape Cod is, not individual towns but as a whole region. That's why we came up with the Great North Woods."

He said that he was not suggesting that tourism is the answer to all of the region's problems, but he said he was optimistic about it. He predicted that Groveton would have a tougher time than Berlin going it alone, because of its size and infrastructure.

"We need to look at our resources. What do you have around you?" asked Groveton Selectman Rob Larson. "It's up to the Legislature or officials. It's up to you, the public, and the land owners. We need to band together to find out what we want to look like five or 10 years from now."

He urged people to look at what they can do. That if it is not making paper, it may be making plastic, or something newer. In response to competition from China, India and soon Brazil, Larson reminded Wausau employees that they have something those other countries don't have and that's the work ethic or standard.

"That's what they don't have and that's why we have all those poisonous toys," Larson said. He said those countries are in environmental shambles compared to this country.

"What about eco-tourism? There are people actually willing to drive three hours from Boston and pay to work on a farm, milk a cow, throw some hay and even smell that stuff that gets on your boots," Larson said.

"Part of the future is about industry that

should be the celebration of life."

Steve Collins, a third-generation mill worker, who said he owned a piece of land and races sled dogs agreed. He said he wanted to start a campground in Northumberland and had found a lot of support for his plan.

Sandra Gagnon said she and her husband were thinking of turning their property that once was Fort Wentworth into an historic attraction. But she worried about government red tape for residents who have good ideas.

"Some of the regulatory agencies have to understand that we can expedite permits," said Executive Councilor District 1 Ray Burton, who offered to help. "Anybody who gets into a snag at the executive level call me. I'd love to get in the middle of it. I love solving snags."

Burton said he has put the word out to state agencies that this part of the state needs jobs. He said after he e-mailed out the message, immediately there was a response that 12 jobs were available at the state prison.

On a larger scale, N.H. Department of Resources and Economic Development Ben Lamontagne, a Colebrook selectman, provided an update on the number of businesses he has and would be meeting with to encourage their relocation to Berlin, Colebrook or Groveton.

"I recently talked to six different companies, who were looking for the kind of work ethic you have here," he said.

There are 60 more companies who have been invited to investigate the potential of the region, including those from Canada, who feel they are being taxed to death, Lamontagne said.

As for the infrastructure in the Groveton area, Peter Riviere, director of the Coos Economic Development Corporation, said the wheels were in motion to revive the rails and bring broadband high speed Internet to the area.

"Business will not come without connectivity," he said of broadband. "We have to make certain the infrastructure is in place. "District steam heating is also being explored to help defray the cost of heating."