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Contact: Audrey Schwartzberg (518) 891-6200, aschwartzberg@adirondack.org

ANCA's Annual Meeting Upends Assumptions about Rural Communities *Meeting topics include main streets, jobs, culture, and refugee resettlement*

Keeseville, NY - Nearly 80 attendees, representing 23 communities and 13 counties, gathered at the historic Stone Mill in downtown Keeseville for the Adirondack North Country Association's Annual Meeting "Unpacking the Secrets of Successful Communities." Recent national analyses and media coverage have reported that things are not so good in rural communities across the nation. According to a May 2016 Washington Post article by Jim Tankersley, "rural areas have seen their business formation fall off a cliff." The article says "experts warn that the trends could be self-perpetuating and endanger the very life of rural economies in the years to come."

"Not so fast," was the underlying theme of ANCA's meeting. Seventy percent of the nearly 350 people who responded to ANCA's survey on successful communities said that their community was better in the past five years or that they were too new to comment. ANCA brought in experts from six communities across Northern New York that are clearly bucking the negative trends. Their communities are visibly thriving, growing, attracting new business start-ups and younger generations. The meeting focused on how they are doing this and how other communities can learn from their successes.

The event kicked off with opening remarks from ANCA Board President Jim Sonneborn, who emphasized ANCA's growth as an organization over the last year. ANCA started the year with nine staff members and now employs 17 people in the sectors of regional advocacy, local economies, and clean energy. Sonneborn also noted a number of projects ANCA has accomplished during the past year in the 14-county region it serves. Projects include its expansion of Farm to School programs, its renewable energy programs, meetings and events that support local artisans, and ANCA's first annual Bike the Barns event which promotes local agriculture and bicycle tourism in the region.

Plattsburgh and Glens Falls were represented at the meeting. Both communities are recent winners of the Governor's new Downtown Revitalization \$10M awards. Clayton, Wilmington and Saranac Lake leadership shared the ways that planning, focus on main streets, good infrastructure, community assets, culture and arts, entrepreneur support, and sheer, dogged persistence were elements of success. "Each time we go to a meeting organized by ANCA, we

are more impressed,” said Bryan Burke of Premises Architecture, PLLC. “They get it. They knock it out of the park every time.” Burke’s wife and business partner, Beverly Eichenlaub looks forward to the meetings outcomes: “We all had such engaging conversations today. We’re excited about what ANCA will produce from this meeting of great minds.”

A discussion that received much attention was what ANCA Executive Director Kate Fish describes as the “wildcard” topic. Are there economic and cultural benefits from attracting refugees to North Country communities? Mayor Chris Louras of Rutland, VT thinks so, and described what Rutland is doing this year to resettle 100 Syrian refugees.

Attorney Anas Saleh of Bousquet Holstein & Volunteer Lawyers Project of Onondaga County, Inc. in Syracuse discussed his positive experiences working with community partners that resettle refugees into businesses and communities in Central New York and Utica. He emphasized the need to hear all points of views, even those concerned about the process. “This is what we need,” said Saleh, whose parents are of Palestinian descent. “We need to have this kind of conversation.”

Saleh recognizes this is a difficult topic for many rural communities and stresses the importance of an honest and open conversation about this issue through channels like ANCA’s annual meeting. “There is the economic piece [regarding potential benefits of refugee resettlement],” he said, “but there is a humanitarian piece as well. Are we going to take this on?” In his opening remarks, he also noted the difficulties faced abroad by immigrants, and that while “tomorrow is never promised, in America there is always promise in tomorrow.”

According to event organizers, the end goal of the meeting is to develop a toolkit, based on real-life successes and best practices, to guide North Country communities in creating their own success stories. ANCA plans to involve many of the meeting participants in a draft of this toolkit and release it in 2017.

[ANCA](#) is an independent nonprofit organization working to build dynamic local economies that sustain thriving communities in Northern New York. Since 1955, ANCA has leveraged the investment of hundreds of millions of dollars into the region in sectors that drive sustainable local economic development.

Photos (2):

1. **JimSonnebornMeeting.jpeg:** ANCA Board of Directors President Jim Sonneborn addresses about 80 attendees of the nonprofit’s Annual Meeting at the Stone Mill in Keeseville, NY on Friday, September 23.
2. **SalehMeeting1.jpeg:** Anas Saleh leads a breakout discussion about refugee resettlement as ANCA staff member Jake Vennie-Vollrath listens in.

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