



ESSEX COUNTY IN THE PARK
INDUSTRIAL DEVELOPMENT AGENCY

Church Street P.O. Box 217 Elizabethtown, NY 12932
518.873.9114 Fax: 873.2011 E-Mail: info@essexcountyyida.com
Web site: www.essexcountyyida.com

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Teleservices firm locates in AuSable Forks

By: Kim Smith Dedam

AUSABLE FORKS – Mountain Valley Teleservices (MVT) showed off its new call center here Friday with a dedication ceremony at the restored old high school on School Street.

Gov. George Pataki recently announced MVT would invest \$550,000 in the facility and create 178 new jobs within the next 18 months. The 11,200 square-foot call center, which provides third-party contract services for infomercial product clients, is expected to be operational by mid-February.

The old high school is located within the pending Essex County Empire Zone boundary amendment area, which is expected to be approved in early February. As such, the project will be eligible for a variety of zone benefits, including approximately \$1.45 million in wage tax credits.

The ribbon cutting was a homecoming for many.

Harold Hance, CEO and president of MVT, left Willsboro nearly 11 years ago. With education and experience under his belt, he said, he wanted to come back and build his business here.

"We are receiving 1,500 calls per day now. We should be at 2,800 calls per day by the end of January. That puts us in month 16 of our business plan."

He started recruiting customer-service staff last April, not too far behind the building-restoration schedule. The company now employs 63 people, who complete in-bound sales services for clients around the country.

Assemblywoman Teresa Sayward (R-Willsboro) congratulated Hance and recalled their first meeting.

"Harold was in high school with my daughter. He came into my office one day, when I was supervisor of Willsboro, and said "I want to come home."

"We started looking for a suitable office space," Sayward said, adding that she called county Industrial Development Agency representatives and said "keep him in Essex County."

"Today is important," she said. "It is a wonderful thing to think that children can bring their business home."

Jay Supervisor Tom O'Neill added historical context.

"Fifty-two years ago, I graduated from high school in this building here," he said. "It's a pleasure to have you in AuSable Forks."

For Shirley Atkins of James Leigh Properties, LLC, which renovated and owns the property, the day had additional significance.

Speaking for her family and husband, James, she dedicated the restored building to the late Howard "Hook" Atkins, James's grandfather.

"He was a great man who profoundly influenced my life," Shirley read from her husband's notes. "I thank him for being a mentor."

The family released balloons in memory of "Hook" Atkins.

Bret Carter, sales manager at MVT, also grew up in Willsboro. After 11 years away, he moved back with the young company to help open up shop. Setting up the computer stations and offices, he said, was exciting.

"We were a little behind the eight ball, but you could see it taking shape. It was really neat," he said. "I love the North Country. Some things changed and some things stayed the same. The people are the same."

MVT salesman Robert Cioffi remained busy at the terminal through the ceremony. A sophomore at Plattsburgh State University, Cioffi said the job experience benefits his education.

"It's an easy-going environment," he said. "I'm learning a lot, business is my major. Harold is a role model to look up to."

Afterward, Hance revealed several goals the company has set. "We are looking to hire up to 178 people and grow to 94 stations," he said. "We would remain open 24 hours a day."

One two-minute television response period in June, he said, returned 180 calls at 3 a.m. Hance said he "fully expects competitors to relocate here or across the lake" in the near future.