

**For Immediate Release  
June 15, 2005**

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## **NMDC's 'One-Stop Shopping' Aids Fort Fairfield Business**

FORT FAIRFIELD – When Kate Barnes, owner of Nathaniel's Lot, needed financing to expand her 10-year-old stained glass and jewelry business she turned to the professionals at the Northern Maine Development Commission (NMDC) for help.

"I had dealings with the people at NMDC in the past," Barnes said, "and I knew everyone there would be glad to help me. NMDC is a great resource for businesses and manufacturers in Aroostook County. It's great to have those people here."

Those "people" Barnes refers to include representatives from the State's Office of Business Development, Maine's Manufacturing Extension Partnership (MEP), a Small Business Development Center (SBDC) and the Office of Tourism.

Headquartered in Caribou, the NMDC was established in 1967 as a nonprofit organization that provides regional planning, economic and community development, business loans and packaging, geographic information system services, and small business counseling services to the northern Maine region. In addition, NMDC is the lead agency for the Aroostook County Empowerment Zone.

"Things are unique here because all our organizations are located under the same roof," said Brian Sutherland, project manager for the Maine MEP - an affiliate of the National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST) under the U.S. Department of Commerce. "Everyone involved with NMDC likes to think what we offer is one-stop shopping.

"When someone like Kate Barnes comes in looking for assistance, we all work together to make sure she gets the kind of help she needs. She doesn't have to go to several different locations to get answers. The answers are right down the hall," Sutherland said.

It sounds simplistic, but it works, said David Spooner, a small business consultant with the SBDC.

"It doesn't matter what type of help the business or the manufacturer needs, it's right here," Spooner said. "In a rural area such as northern Maine, that's especially important because distance means something here and there are specific challenges we are all faced with because of that distance."

An artist of unusual talent, Barnes began working in her hometown of Fort Fairfield seven years ago after a 14-year teaching career in Mars Hill. "Like most people in this area, I've always had to have a couple of jobs to make ends meet," Barnes said.

In addition to her business, Barnes also serves as treasurer, personnel director and office manager for the town of Fort Fairfield and has been a volunteer firefighter there for two years.

"Several months ago I needed funds to expand my business by buying a kiln for creating fused and slumped glass, and for annealing my lamp work beads" Barnes said. "I

needed \$2,000. It doesn't sound like much, but it represented a lot of money for me at the time."

Barnes looked for help at the best place she could find it – NMDC.

Working together, Sutherland and Spooner worked with Barnes to develop a business plan, develop a marketing initiative and explained grant programs available to small businesses.

Barnes said the process of writing the grant application and going through the process was painless. "The grant I received from the Maine MEP Rural Development Fund provided me the opportunity to get the kiln right away and put it to immediate use," she said.

She was especially pleased with the effort made by Spooner and Sutherland. "I wrote most the application myself, but they were right there all the way to critique it and offer suggestions on what I needed to add," she said.

"I think some small business people don't have the courage to try these things on their own," Barnes said. "But Brian came right over, sat at my kitchen table and encouraged me by showing me what I needed and telling me I should take a shot.

Barnes is not the only one pleased with her success. "I've been working here as a representative of the Maine MEP for three years," Sutherland said, "and it still makes me feel good to help a business or manufacturer fulfill a dream. This is a tough area here," he said. "Big companies have a difficult time succeeding, so you know it's even harder for owners of small craft-minded companies."

Kate Barnes appears to be one of the more successful ones. Her stained glass sun catchers and jewelry are now being sold throughout northern Maine and as far away as Freeport and the Adirondacks in New York State.

"Things have really picked up since I got the kiln," she said, "because I'm able to offer a more diverse line of products, attract special orders and tap into higher end markets.

"Thanks to my experience with NMDC and Maine MEP, my business is expected to increase by a third during this year alone," Barnes said. "I could not have done it without the help offered there."

The Maine MEP is an affiliate of the NIST under the U.S. Department of Commerce. The national MEP is a network of manufacturing extension centers that provide business and technical assistance to smaller manufacturers in all 50 states, the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico. Through MEP, manufacturers have access to more than 2000 manufacturing and business "coaches" whose job is to help firms make changes that lead to greater productivity, increased profits, and enhanced global competitiveness. For more information on the Maine MEP program call 1-800-637-4634.