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By RICHARD PETERSON
Tribune Staff Writer

Group: Poverty should be fought on personal level

If major changes are needed to combat poverty, the country's political leaders should focus on providing resources more directly toward people, rather than government, attendees at the Opportunity Link 2007 annual membership meeting were told Saturday.

Opportunity Link is a Havre-based nonprofit group that provides funding to jumpstart or assist programs designed to eliminate poverty in northcentral Montana. The group won a \$12 million grant in 2003 to help fight poverty.

Montana State University-Bozeman economics professor Dino Falaschetti, a former member of the U.S. President's Council of Economic Advisers and keynote speaker at the meeting, said current federal policies that focus on rebuilding physical places proved to be unsuccessful during the recent attempts at restoring Louisiana and portions of the Gulf Coast after Hurricane Katrina.

Falaschetti used the example of the Katrina aftermath when he spoke to about 50 people at the membership meeting, which featured several speakers who focused on current and future efforts to end poverty. He said that even after billions of dollars were spent on the Gulf Coast recovery, people there are no better off than they were before the hurricane.

Directly funding programs like Opportunity Link is more likely to empower people, which in turn, empowers and improves towns and communities, he said.

"There are a lot of developmental resources out there and we need to aim them more directly at constituents," Falaschetti said. "The bottom line is, you want laws to provide people with incentives to be productive."

Most of the people attending the meeting Saturday at the Holiday Inn work for service agencies in rural areas of northcentral Montana and on local Indian reservations.

Speaker Linda Reed, a former banker with the Montana Community Foundation, encouraged them to build local community foundations to retain local wealth, provide support for community development and to ignite economic development. Her organization has provided some Montana communities with \$25,000 grants to get their foundations up and running.

"When we think of economic development we think of job creation and higher wages. Yes, the are needed. But a strong infrastructure is needed as well to help in recruiting people to fill these jobs," Reed said.

The list of speakers also included Great Falls native Maria Valandra of the Montana Indian Business Alliance and Tony Looking Elk of St. Paul, Minn., of the Northwest Area Foundation.

Officials from Opportunity Link said the goal of the meeting was to make people aware of other resources to help end poverty.

"We don't need to reinvent the wheel here and Opportunity Link wants to bring these people together," said Leah Noel, community development director. "There's a lot of people here who want to end poverty."